



Southern California Edison Takes a Hit Over Tunnel Road Project

Mission Canyon Residents Voice Their Concern; Utility Company Promises to Clean Up Its Mess



Credit: Brian Osgood

By **Brian Osgood**

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Southern California Edison (SCE) stands accused of irresponsible practices by Santa Barbara County and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers after it shoved large quantities of debris over the edge of the road and onto the hillsides surrounding the headwaters of Mission Creek during a road-widening project in December 2019. "While conducting the necessary road maintenance activities in mid-December, SCE crews performed more extensive grading than originally expected, resulting in debris moving down the slope and into Mission Creek and other unintended impacts to this area," said SCE in a press release.

The utility has stated that it is taking steps to remedy the situation. It could face fines as high as \$50,000 a day if it fails to make corrections, according to a Notice of Violation letter from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers dated January 8,



2020. The letter states that SCE's actions constitute a potential violation of the Clean Water Act.

Residents of the neighborhood surrounding the Tunnel trailhead have strong words for SCE, whose practices have been "astounding in terms of lapse of control," according to Marc Chytilo, who can see the creek from his house. SCE has promised to clean up the mess. "The massive dumping of debris into Mission Creek was egregious and unacceptable. We expect a proper restoration plan with oversight from the California Fish and Wildlife Department and other regulators," said Das Williams, county supervisor for the area, which falls in his District 1.

The incident began in mid-December, when residents began to complain that SCE had pushed debris from a road-widening project over the side of the trail and down the hillside above Mission Creek, the largest creek in Santa Barbara. "The work was first brought to my attention on December 13 and was investigated on December 16. A stop-work notification was sent to SCE that same day," said Adam Hendel, principal civil engineer for the City of Santa Barbara's Land Development program in Public Works.

SCE stated in a release issued on January 31 that it "will do temporary repairs to stabilize the slope above Mission Creek in advance of forecasted rains. The company will then work with all the appropriate agencies to repair damage and restore the creek." The release goes on to say, "This grading was not in accordance with our established processes and resulted in soil moving down the slope and into Mission Creek."

The stabilization effort is being conducted under the authority of an emergency grading permit from the county. Hendel says that SCE has been "cooperative" and is expected to release a statement on their progress this week. In a recent update, SCE stated that "Jesusita foot trail emergency rock fall hazard abatement to remove side-cast rocks/boulders started on Monday 2/3 and was completed on Wednesday 2/5." The trail has now been reopened, according to Handel, who said, "The work that SCE undertook on the access road above Jesusita Trail was completed on February 5."

In the meantime, residents of the area surrounding the site are still upset. "When I saw it for the first time, I was shocked," said a resident of the surrounding area who says she hikes the trail frequently. "I've lived here 50 years, and this is just devastating."

SCE attended a meeting of the Mission Canyon Association, which is said to have been passionate. "Right now, it looks like the damage from this will last for years," said Nancy Weiss, a boardmember of the Mission Canyon Association. "There are a lot of unanswered questions, and we expect them to take full responsibility, be transparent in their assessment of how this happened, and put forward a well-vetted plan to make sure this can never happen again."

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