

Four Current Threats to Sacred Lands of the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band

The Amah Mutsun Tribal Band is currently developing a Sacred Lands Legal Defense Fund. This comes at a time when multiple proposed development projects threaten sacred and culturally significant sites within the tribe's ancestral territory. Several of these proposals are described below.

California High Speed Rail Project: The current alignment of the California High Speed Rail segment from Merced to Gilroy would impact seven significant Amah Mutsun cultural sites. These sites include villages that were home to Amah Mutsun ancestors for thousands of years, some of which contain many Amah Mutsun burials. Some of these threatened cultural sites are located near four historic lakes east of Gilroy that were drained in the 1880s to make the land available for settler agriculture. The Amah Mutsun hope to restore these lakes, one of which is a sacred medicine lake. The Amah Mutsun Tribal Band has been in consultation with the California High Speed Rail Authority for 16 years, suggesting alternative routes that could avoid the tribe's sacred lands. Despite this, the rail project continues to be slated for the original proposed alignment.

Pacheco Dam expansion project: The Santa Clara Valley Water District is planning to build a new \$1.1 billion dam east of Gilroy in the vicinity of the existing Pacheco Reservoir. This new dam would expand the reservoir capacity 23-fold, from 6 thousand acre-feet (TAF) to 141.6 TAF, making it the largest reservoir in Santa Clara County. Archaeological surveys have documented at least 42 cultural sites that would be disturbed by the construction of the Pacheco Dam. In addition to cultural artifacts, the streams of the area are known for etched circles on boulders known as "cupule rock art," throughout the stream bed. The project would submerge this art as well as approximately 943 football fields of oak woodland and stream habitat, further condemning native steelhead trout to a limited range. The Amah Mutsun would like to restore the Pacheco Creek watershed so that the steelhead can freely migrate, as Creator intended.



Photo credit: California Water Commission

Sargent Quarry project: Juristac, the most sacred site of the Amah Mutsun, is located south of Gilroy on lands known today as Sargent Ranch. For thousands of years, Mutsun ancestors lived and held sacred ceremonies at this location in the southern foothills of the Santa Cruz Mountains, above the confluence of the Pajaro and San Benito rivers. An investor group based in San Diego purchased the land at a bankruptcy auction and is currently seeking to develop a 320-acre open pit sand and gravel mining operation on the property. The Amah Mutsun are in need of strong legal representation to assist in preventing the desecration of Juristac.

Highway 101 Nodes: San Benito County is currently planning to approve the development of four commercial development "nodes" off of Highway 101 on open space lands adjacent to freeway off-ramps. All four of these proposed development locations would impact cultural and sacred lands. Two are located adjacent to Sargent Ranch, and are part of the Amah Mutsun sacred landscape of Juristac. These developments would also severely impact the essential wildlife corridors of this area that support American badgers, mountain lions, and other species. Despite years of efforts by the Amah Mutsun to inform San Benito County of the locations of sacred and cultural sites, the tribe does not believe the county has taken cultural resource protection seriously or taken appropriate steps to consult with the tribe on projects including the Highway 101 Nodes project.