



Photographs by ROBERT GAUTHIER Los Angeles Times

SCIENCE-BASED efforts to protect ecosystems threatened by groundwater pumping have been paying off at the Kern River Preserve.

Underlying risk to vital ecosystems

California is recognized as one of the world's hot spots of biodiversity, with more species of plants and animals than any other state. And a significant number of the state's species, including frogs and birds, live in habitats that depend on groundwater.

These rich ecosystems — including spring-fed streams, wetlands, riparian forests and oak woodlands — are vulnerable to declines in groundwater levels. In areas where unchecked pumping from wells severely depletes aquifers, once-thriving wetlands and forests can dry up and die.

Spotting threats to vulnerable natural areas has become a mission for Melissa Rohde, a hydrologist who has spent years analyzing satellite data and water levels in wells to come up with strategies for preventing ecosystems from being left high and dry.

"Nature has been getting the short end of the stick. It basically gets whatever is left behind, which oftentimes is not enough," Rohde said. "How do we ensure that these ecosystems are protected?"

California is the only state with

Hydrologist focuses on groundwater levels, aiming to help save California habitats that could be pumped dry

By Ian James
REPORTING FROM WELDON, CALIF.



A RESTORED wetland at the preserve draws a variety of birds and recharges the aquifer so tree roots can reach its water.

a groundwater law that includes provisions intended to protect groundwater-dependent ecosystems. But the law, adopted in 2014, gives considerable leeway to local agencies in developing water management plans that prevent "significant and unreasonable adverse impacts."

When Rohde and other scientists examined the local-level plans for parts of the state that fall under regulation, they found only about 9% of groundwater-dependent ecosystems were adequately protected, while the remaining 91% were vulnerable.

Rohde has been focusing on finding ways to change that, in California and around the world.

Often working at home, she has pored over satellite data to spot decreases in vegetation greenness during drought, a telltale sign of die-off caused by declining aquifer levels. And she has analyzed how different types of trees, including willows, cottonwoods and oaks, fare when water levels fall, depending on the depth of their roots.

Rohde and other researchers [See **Groundwater**, A7]

Hollywood crews in crisis as 'action' calls drop in L.A.

Last year's strikes created a dry spell for everyone. Below-line workers still reeling.

By KAITLYN HUAMANI

After more than two decades in the entertainment industry, Keith Dunkerley still loves nothing more than working on a set. The 47-year-old director of photography and camera operator, who's had consistent work since he moved to Los Angeles 23 years ago, said his is "the best job in the world."

Since the writers' and actors' strikes last year and the slow restart of production, though, Dunkerley said his work opportunities look quite different than in previous years: He has worked only 18 days during the first five months of 2024.

"People outside the business don't understand this is not a factory," he said. "It's not like, 'OK, the strike's over, go back to the factory, turn the lights on and get the

machines going.' A lot of us knew it's going to take some time to ramp things up."

While Dunkerley supported his family through savings and odd jobs as a handyman on TaskRabbit during the strikes, the sluggish rebound has been difficult for him. He's recently made more than 60 calls to friends and industry contacts to look for prospects.

What Dunkerley is experiencing is part of the massive ripple effect of strikes by the Writers Guild and the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists. Tens of thousands of people working in entertainment and adjacent industries have been affected, with crew members especially hit hard.

"I am currently in the worst place I've ever been in my entire life financially," said Heather Fink, a boom operator and director. "The industry is in a crisis. It is not back to normal. We are in debt."

FilmLA, a nonprofit that tracks on-location permits [See **Hollywood**, A9]



GENARO MOLINA Los Angeles Times

U.S. DISTRICT JUDGE David O. Carter, left, leads retired Judge Jay C. Gandhi on an early morning tour of downtown L.A.'s Skid Row in September 2023.

If not a czar, close enough

U.S. District Judge David O. Carter wields nearly unilateral power on homelessness policy in L.A.

By DOUG SMITH

It's an idea that always beguiles but never delivers.

Why can't Los Angeles have a homelessness "czar," a single person with the power to corral and direct the hodgepodge of agencies, as well as bridge the political divides that stymie govern-

ment's best intentions?

Mayor Karen Bass has her deputy for homelessness and housing. The county has the Homeless Initiative, with its own executive director. Members of the Board of Supervisors and City Council act as mini-czars, implementing diverse homelessness strategies in their districts. An independ-

ent housing authority decides who gets rental subsidies. The joint-powers Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority has its chief executive officer who reports to both the city and county.

Now a judge has slammed his gavel over all of them. He's no young upstart but an 80-year-old who [See **Judge**, A12]

Sheriff's Dept. cited for deadly blaze

State says neglected maintenance led to mobile shooting range fire that killed deputy.

By KERI BLAKINGER

State regulators have accused the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department of skipping inspections, neglecting maintenance and committing an array of "willful" safety violations that led to a 2023 mobile shooting range fire that killed one deputy, according to records obtained by The Times.

Last month, the California Division of Occupational Safety and Health hit the department with just over \$300,000 in fines for a series of safety violations in a mobile range trailer parked outside the Castaic jail complex. Inspectors said the buildup of combustible dust — such as accumulated gunpowder — caused the deadly blaze.

"The employer failed to conduct daily, weekly, monthly, and bi-annual preventive maintenance on the indoor mobile shooting trailer," the agency wrote in a 19-page citation issued in April. "As a result on or about October 10, 2023, two employees suffered serious physical harm to their body when the indoor trailer exploded and caught on fire."

Both of the burned deputies were hospitalized, and last month one of them — Alfredo "Freddy" Flores, 51 — died. He was buried May 9 during a funeral in Sylmar.

"We now know that Freddy lost his life because mobile trailers like the one he was in had a known history of catching fire due to poor design and poor maintenance," said attorney John Carpenter, who is representing the Flores family.

The Assn. of Los Angeles Deputy Sheriffs blamed county leaders on the Board of Supervisors for failing to "properly fund and equip" the Sheriff's Department, which has a \$4-billion budget.

[See **Fire**, A6]

Closing remarks in Trump's trial

Prosecutor calls hush money payment a "cover-up"; lawyers assert ex-president's innocence. **NATION, A5**

More campus workers strike

The walkout over the treatment of protesters reaches UCLA and UC Davis. **CALIFORNIA, B1**

The crux of the Live Nation suit

The U.S. call for a breakup suggests that previous antitrust efforts have fallen short. **BUSINESS, A8**

Weather

Low clouds, then sun. L.A. Basin: 73/57 **B6**

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