



LEFT: Big Tujunga Dam in the Angeles National Forest. BELOW: Irma Carter, Paulette Jewsome and Tyree Sorrels finish work at Chantry Flat in the Angeles National Forest.

WATER RESCUE

California's San Gabriel Mountains offer more to LA and the surrounding community than meets the eye. **BY JENNIFER BUEGE**

ABOUT AN HOUR northeast of Los Angeles on State Route 2 lies an idyllic antidote to the city: the Angeles National Forest. Bighorn sheep and deer roam its approximately 700,000 mountainous acres; numerous bird species make the trees their homes; and more than 3.2 million visitors each year come to swim, camp, ski and hike.

While many Angelenos know the forest as a place for an easy weekend getaway, few are aware of the pivotal role it plays in their daily lives: The Angeles' San Gabriel Mountains supply 30 percent of the water for Los Angeles County.

In 2009, a wildfire ripped through the region, putting that supply at risk. It burned off native vegetation in the forest's watershed, allowing thirsty invasive species to move in. Public enemy No. 1 was *Arundo donax*, aka giant cane, a plant that can suck up about five times the amount of water that native species do; its rise to dominance severely reduced the amount of water that flowed downstream and was available for use in Los Angeles County.

Help came from what many would consider an unexpected source: The Coca-Cola Company. For years, however, water stewardship has been an important part of the beverage company's mission. In 2007, Coke set a goal to replenish 100 percent of the water it uses in its drinks by 2020—a goal it reached an estimated five years early.

In 2014, Coca-Cola and The Coca-Cola Foundation joined the U.S. Forest Service and the National Forest Foundation in their work to rehabilitate the watershed in the San Gabriel Mountains. Coke provided volunteers and funding, which went, in

part, to employ local youth conservation corps members, who worked to revitalize the area.

Jon Radtke, chief hydrogeologist and water sustainability program director for Coca-Cola, says that one of the most satisfying aspects of the program was seeing its impact on the young workers. "The Forest Service recruited conservation corps members from the local community," he explains. "They developed a great appreciation for this watershed and this landscape that they didn't know about before. Many had never visited this national forest land, even though they live close by. But through the conservation corps program and the work they did, they developed a deep sense of pride in their natural surroundings that they extended to their own communities."

As the invasive species were removed, native plants began to reestablish themselves. The project officially wrapped in 2017, and the transformation was dramatic. "When looking at the before and after photos, you can see the drastic difference," Radtke says.

He estimates that with the efforts in the San Gabriel Mountains, Coke and its partners are replenishing almost half a billion liters of water a year. And in 2016, through projects both domestic and global, Coke replenished an estimated 221 billion liters—or 133 percent of its worldwide sales volume that year. "For every drop we use, we work to give one back," Radtke says. "It's a critical focus area for the company." ▼



AUDRA MELTON