

# Santa Cruz Sentinel

Community members 'Pitch In' to clean up Santa Cruz County

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Sen. John Laird talks about the importance of environmental stewardship and the formation of the San Lorenzo River levee at the kickoff event for the second annual Pitch In All County Cleanup Day. (Aric Sleeper – Santa Cruz Sentinel)

SANTA CRUZ — Community members from around Santa Cruz County and beyond pulled on gloves, grabbed litter pickers and other tools at more than 50 cleanup sites from Davenport to Watsonville on a sunny Saturday morning for the second annual [Pitch In All County Clean Up Day](#).

“I was the organizer for the Trash Talkers, which is a coalition of elected officials and agencies from the Land Trust to the Community Foundation to the Farm Bureau, to State Parks to the Department of Fish and Wildlife and all of our counties and cities,” said Pitch In Santa Cruz County Organizer Sally-Christine Rodgers. “We have a lot of people engaged who came up with the Pitch In initiative and our goal is to make Santa Cruz the cleanest county in the state.”



The countywide cleanup effort was led by Rodgers and kicked off along the San Lorenzo River, near the office of the Coastal Watershed Council, with a panel of elected officials who were participating in the cleanup effort.

“Days like today, this countywide cleanup day, and our regular river health day volunteer events are about taking action for what we all care about,” said [Coastal Watershed Council](#) Executive Director Laurie Egan to community members gathered under the Soquel Avenue Bridge. “We know as a community that a clean and healthy environment is the foundation for a thriving and healthy community.”

Sen. John Laird, who serves as a member of the Senate’s committee on Natural Resources and Water, joined volunteers and other community leaders under the Soquel Avenue Bridge to talk about the importance of environmental stewardship and to give the crowd a brief history lesson about the formation of the San Lorenzo River levee.

“The four bridges across the river were all flat,” said Laird. “So in the 100-year storm in January of 1982, huge redwood logs battered this bridge down and at the time there was a water main connecting the two sides of town, and it was not a pretty thing when it came down. So you will notice that this bridge and the others are arched now.”





Community members and local leaders gathered under the Soquel Avenue Bridge before cleaning up the Santa Cruz Riverwalk, which was one of about 50 locations included in the Pitch In All County Cleanup Day. (Aric Sleeper – Santa Cruz Sentinel)

Assemblymember Gail Pellerin was stoked to clean up the river Saturday morning and mentioned that it was appropriate to schedule an environmental cleanup on the weekend of Mother's Day.

"We're all here to celebrate Mother Earth," said Pellerin. "It is so critical that we take care of our river, of our lands, and get this trash out of here today. We are not just picking up garbage today, we are setting the tone. We are part of the culture of Santa Cruz County. For me, if I'm getting out of my car in a parking lot and there's trash, I'm picking it up and putting it in my car and throwing it out later. We need to be doing this every single day, everywhere we go, to make sure that we're protecting our environment."

During his introduction, Egan mentioned how Santa Cruz Mayor Fred Keeley is a "river neighbor," and often spends his free time cleaning up Branciforte Creek with his trash grabber.

"When John Laird and Bruce Van Allen were on the city council back in the day, they said like a drumbeat — we have to stop turning our back to the river," said Keeley. "We have to turn our face to the river."



Santa Cruz Mayor Fred Keeley reminded volunteers to “Not turn our backs to the river,” before wielding his trash grabbers and bucket at the second annual Pitch In All County Cleanup Day. (Aric Sleeper – Santa Cruz Sentinel)

Among the approximately 30 volunteers at the Riverwalk cleanup site was Robert Gutierrez of Salinas, who said that he enjoys volunteering and walking along the San Lorenzo River when he is in the city.

“I thought that it would be a good opportunity to take care of this area because I frequent it a lot,” said Gutierrez.

Coastal Watershed Council River Ecologist Kaiya Giuliano-Monroy was leading volunteers onto the banks of the San Lorenzo and showing them the non-native species to remove, like radishes and Italian thistle, to make way for the local plants such as yellow bush lupine and California mugwort.

“We have monthly river health day events and I always appreciate the volunteers coming out because we need a lot of hands,” said Giuliano-Monroy. “And I am very appreciative of Pitch In because it amplifies all of the voices and all of the efforts across the county.”

Santa Cruz Parks and Recreation Director Tony Elliot was volunteering at the river cleanup with his 8-year-old daughter Olivia, who was excited to spend her Saturday picking up trash with her dad.

“When me and my dad are done cleaning this river, it’s going to be clean as a whistle,” Olivia told the Sentinel.





Volunteers including Santa Cruz Mayor Fred Keeley arm themselves with trash grabbers, buckets and an assortment of other tools to clean up the river levee at the Pitch In All County Cleanup Day. (Aric Sleeper – Santa Cruz Sentinel)

Elliot mentioned that he has been taking Olivia to river cleanups since she could walk and he is always happy to partner with community organizations, such as the Coastal Watershed Council, which was one out of about 80 local organizations involved in the Pitch In All County Clean Up Day.

“We at Parks and Recreation are very excited about this day where hundreds of volunteers across the city and the county are helping to make a difference,” said Elliot. “Our parks, beaches and open spaces are heavily loved and heavily used so to get out here with the community and to partner with organizations like Coastal Watershed Council means the world. Our town thrives on partnerships and collaborations so this day means a lot and these relationships mean a lot.”

To learn about Pitch In Santa Cruz County, visit [pitchinsantacruz.org](https://pitchinsantacruz.org).