



## Arrowhead Ridge Expands to 172 Acres

On Wednesday June 9, 2021, the San Bernardino Mountains Land Trust (SBMLT) closed escrow on the purchase of Arrowhead Ridge II, the second half of the onetime proposed Eagle Ridge subdivision of two hundred homes. This failed development was the catalyst for the creation of Save Our Forest Association over 30 years ago!

SBMLT Executive Director, Peter Jorris, applauded the acquisition as “the fulfillment of an incredible conservation rescue operation—an achievement that was unimaginable 20 years ago, a lost cause that was abandoned as being completely out of reach.”

The Land Trust acquired the first 80-acre Arrowhead Ridge site ten years ago in April 2011 at a bank foreclosure sale after the owners defaulted on their construction loan. That acquisition by SBMLT undercut the feasibility of developing the rest of the large 8-phase subdivision project and created the possibility that the remaining acreage would eventually be listed on the real estate market.



-Slope Restoration at Arrowhead Ridge. Photo by S. Seccombe

James Asher, a registered forester, and President of the Land Trust was instrumental in illuminating the extraordinary qualities of the Arrowhead Ridge forested lands, which he was well acquainted with ever since working for the Forest Service in the late 1950s.

The history of Arrowhead Ridge is a remarkable testament to the power of ordinary citizens to help save our forest from the commercial pressures for over-development. SBMLT now plans to expand a popular trail system on the site and to continue with long-range restoration projects that have gradually progressed over the past decade.

Arrowhead Ridge is off Grass Valley Road and open to the public from dawn to dusk.

For those who would like to volunteer or contribute to these efforts, please contact the Land Trust at [info@SBMLT.net](mailto:info@SBMLT.net) or phone Peter Jorris at 909-867-3536.

## Church of the Woods Court Hearing Set for January 2022

As part of Save Our Forest Association’s longstanding efforts to protect the environmentally sensitive forest landscapes of the San Bernardino Mountains, SOFA has long opposed the controversial Church of the Woods project, a proposed development along the Rim of the World Scenic Byway near the town of Rimforest. The steep, forested hilltop site is surrounded by National Forest and includes the headwaters of Little Bear Creek, which flows into Lake Arrowhead. It also provides habitat for numerous wildlife species and serves as an important corridor for wildlife movement over the mountains. The project would level the hilltop, clear-cut the mature forest on the site, and bury the headwaters of Little Bear Creek under nearly 40 feet of fill in order to build a large new church, recreational facilities and parking lots. Not to mention the seven stoplights added along Highway 18.

SOFA has worked to protect this special natural site since the project was first proposed in 2003. After an earlier proposal was abandoned due to environmental concerns and community opposition, the project applicant proposed a revised version of the project in 2017. However, the environmental impact report for the project failed to adequately analyze and mitigate the project’s impacts to wildlife and sensitive habitat, emergency evacuation, scenic resources, and hydrology and water quality, among other issues, and did not account for the project’s inconsistency with the County General Plan.

-Continued Page 3

## Strawberry Peak Parcel Sold to Better Place Forests

In late September, the San Bernardino Mountains Land Trust closed the sale of fifty-two acres of land off of Highway 189 near Strawberry Peak to Better Place Forests. Better Place Forests is a mission-driven company dedicated to land conservation that provides a unique end-of-life option for those who choose cremation. Their motto is “Leave the earth better.” Because of their commitment to land conservation, Better Place Forests was a natural fit for the divestiture. Save Our Forest Association supported the sale.

The company has ten conservation memorial forests across six states. They work with land trusts to protect the land for future generations while allowing customers to choose a final resting place that leaves a legacy of conservation through the purchase of memorial trees. Along with conserving the memorial forests, for every tree sold, Better Place Forests makes a donation to One Tree Planted, a non-profit that does critical reforestation work around the country.

During a memorial ceremony in the forest, the ashes of the deceased are carefully mixed with soil from around the tree and spread over the ground. Family and friends are welcome to visit the memorial trees.

### Public Access

Since Better Place Forests took ownership of the property, SOFA and other partners have received many questions about public access to the trails near Strawberry Peak. In their other forests, access is restricted to customers and their visitors. However, Better Place Forests understands the unique dynamic in Lake Arrowhead and how beloved these local trails are.

Better Place Forest will continue to allow recreational hikers from the general public to use the trails with some limitations. They ask that hikers stay on marked arterial trails and be respectful of families in the forest. During memorial ceremonies, which occur once or twice a week, signs will be posted that the trails are closed to respect the grieving families and the intimacy of the event. On days when the trails are open to the public, they ask that visiting hikers be respectful of customers and refrain from picnicking and playing loud music. Alternative access to Strawberry Peak and the San Bernardino National Forest trails can be found off of Highway 18.

If you are interested in bringing a large group to the forest to hike, like Boy Scouts, school groups, etc., please contact them in advance so that they can facilitate the best forest experience. They welcome this type of engagement, and they would happily host your group as the schedule allows.

### Development Plans

Better Place Forests intends to make physical improvements that enhance the experience for visitors while maintaining the existing character and history of the property. Over the next few years, they plan to build a small “Welcome House” for customers, reconfigure the entry/exit points from Highway 189, add parking, and enhance the existing trails. Most importantly, they will maintain the forest health by doing fuels reduction, removing invasive species, and ensuring that the trees and habitats are thriving.



Entrance to Better Place Forests Property

### Outreach

They welcome the community to come and learn more about the forest, their approach to end-of-life, and the forest. If you have questions about access or want to learn more, please reach out to them directly. Chad Barnes, the onsite manager for the property, can be reached at [chad.barnes@betterplaceforests.com](mailto:chad.barnes@betterplaceforests.com).

Based on SOFA’s experience with Better Place Forests, we feel confident that Better Place Forests will be an excellent steward of the land and that they will maintain the property in a way that honors the mission and value of conservation.

*“Better Place Forest will continue to allow recreational hikers from the general public to use the trails with some limitations.”*

## Nestle / Blue Triton Hearing Update

On March 1, 2015, the Save Our Forest Association wrote to Randy Moore, Regional Forester, requesting that the Forest Service stop water removal from Strawberry Creek by Nestle Waters NA in view of their long-expired water permits. No response was received. SOFA again wrote to the USFS Front Country District Ranger on May 2, 2016, requesting that water removal stop while a proposed five-year NEPA study take place. No response was received. On February 8, 2018, SOFA wrote to the CA State Water Resources Control Board objecting to the proposed five-year study period which allowed Nestle to continue withdrawing an uncontrolled amount of water while the study was taking place.

Finally, our State Water Board is preparing for a public hearing to be held on January 10, 2022, on the State Water Board's Draft Cease and Desist Order which could finally STOP the illegal diversion of water on our San Bernardino National Forest from Strawberry Creek below Rimforest. Nestle Waters NA is now owned by Blue Triton Brands, a private equity firm, seeking to continue the water diversions from our public lands for their corporate profit. This illegal and unpermitted water diversion increases the fire risk to our community, and negatively impacts the wildlife and vegetation that would benefit from natural spring flows that have been previously documented before Nestle and others diverted water to be bottled and sold at public expense. This continuing water diversion is a giveaway of our most precious natural resource, water, on lands managed by the US Forest Service for public benefit.

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We are hopeful that the Administrative Hearing Officer for the CA State Water Resources Control Board will weigh all the evidence presented and finally put an end to the decades of water removal from our public lands. Meanwhile, the water diversions continue without any consideration for our state of emergency drought conditions or action by the US Forest Service to limit the amount taken 24/7 by Blue Triton Brands.

Please continue to BOYCOTT all purchases of Arrowhead Springs Brand Bottled Water.



*The SOFA Adopt-a-Highway Crew: Pictured left to right: Mark C., Debra C., Wendy C., Heather S., James E., Lori S., Don K., Carol K. Not pictured: Jamie W., Sarah B., Jamie B. Photo by Hugh A. Bialecki*

## ***-Church of the Woods, Continued from Page One***



*-One of the Areas of the COW property to be clear-cut.*

SOFA submitted extensive comments to the Planning Commission highlighting these flaws. However, the San Bernardino County Planning Commission approved the project in January 2020. SOFA, Sierra Club, and the Audubon Society then appealed the Commission's approval to the County Board of Supervisors. When the appeal was denied, SOFA, Sierra Club, and the Audubon filed a lawsuit in San Bernardino Superior Court in November 2020. The parties filed briefs with the court during the summer of 2021, and a hearing is scheduled for January 11, 2022. SOFA, Sierra Club, and Audubon are represented in the case by Shute, Mihaly & Weinberger LLP. PLEASE donate to help with the legal fees.

