

# The Yuba Accord: Investing in California's Future

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Restoring California's waterways can be controversial, difficult and expensive. Nevertheless, for state agencies, including the State Water Resources Control Board, it is an important part of our responsibility.

Budget limitations however, are changing how we fulfill these obligations, whether it is on the Colorado River, on the Klamath River, or on one of the richest estuaries in North America that sources water for 20 million people – the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

Because of our financial limits, we have increasingly called upon citizens and stakeholders to help craft responsible, sustainable solutions.

Fortunately, we are learning valuable lessons from several promising partnerships, including the Lower Yuba River Accord, implemented in 2008. The Lower Yuba is one of California's signature salmon rivers; with no hatcheries, it nurtures one of the last natural chinook salmon runs along 24 miles in the Central Valley.

The impressive Lower Yuba River Accord illustrates the importance of three key elements of effective restoration. They include collaboration, the imagination of motivated parties and a commitment to science.

The Yuba Accord turned nearly two decades of controversy into consensus, after the board called upon the parties to build a sustainable solution through collaboration. In 2005, Trout Unlimited, the Bay Institute, California's Department of Fish and Game, Department of Water Resources, federal resource agencies, irrigation districts and the Yuba County Water Agency announced a framework agreement that became the Yuba Accord. After two successful one-year pilot programs and an unchallenged environmental documentation process, the State Water Resources Control Board in 2008 amended YCWA's water rights, clearing the way for the Yuba Accord's implementation.

The Yuba Accord provides significant benefits, including optimum flow requirements for salmon and steelhead in 78 percent of the years, dependable surface water for the local agricultural economy, supplemental water supplies for cities, for farms and for the Bay-Delta and groundwater management.

Local citizens brought a spark of necessary creativity and imagination to the Yuba Accord, leading to several of the largest and most carefully managed water transfers in California history. Water transfers are a favored tool under state law

for helping to meet California's needs. During the drought years of 2007 through 2010, YCWA transferred more than 612,000 acre-feet of water, or an annual average of 153,000 acre-feet, to the Department of Water Resources. These supplies benefit fish and wildlife species in the Bay-Delta ecosystem and cities and farms statewide.

The Yuba County Water Agency is using this revenue to improve public safety and the environment on a local level. For example, partnering with Yuba County, YCWA secures \$78 million in bonds to finance the local cost-share of the new \$186 million Feather River setback levee.

This 6-mile-long setback will reduce the flood risk in southern Yuba County and neighboring Yuba City. It also established 1,550 acres of wildlife habitat. YCWA is also administering a \$1 million program to reimburse farmers for the installation of more efficient electric groundwater pump motors, replacing up to 65 diesel pump engines. This reduces fossil fuel demands by more than 500,000 gallons a year and reduces greenhouse gas emissions by up to 6,000 tons a year.

Lastly, a commitment to science will net several generations of environmental improvements. State and federal agencies, conservation groups, and others worked to establish a matrix for prioritizing salmon and steelhead habitat limitations. This matrix led to biologically based flow requirements maximizing the occurrence of optimum fisheries flows, which in turn led YCWA to create a new operational index enabling it to meet these strategic flows.

The results are promising. The National Marine Fisheries Service – a leading Yuba Accord participant – in its 2009 draft Central Valley salmon and steelhead recovery plan stated that the Yuba Accord will "considerably improve conditions in the Lower Yuba River." Further, a "River Management Team," financed with \$6 million by YCWA, is undertaking a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation program to determine the effectiveness of the new requirements.

Collaboratively managed by conservation groups, the Yuba County Water Agency, and state and federal agencies, and assisted by University of California, Davis, scientists, this team is performing numerous studies in the river.

The Yuba Accord is a landmark agreement, and an excellent example of collaboration, science and imagination. These valuable lessons should be considered a template of success for all of us working to improve California's resources in a balanced, responsible manner, particularly in the Delta. In this way, the State Water Resources Control Board is fulfilling our responsibility to the people of California.