

## California Department of Water Resources



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### CONTRACT AWARDED FOR MERCED RIVER SALMON HABITAT ENHANCEMENT PROJECT

The Department of Water Resources has awarded a \$2.8 million contract for the next phase of a major project with the California Department of Fish and Game to enhance salmon habitat along the Merced River. Construction is expected to begin early in July and be completed in late Fall of 2001.

Ford Construction Company Inc., of Lodi, received the construction contract to improve salmon habitat between river miles 42 and 44, just upstream of the Highway 59 bridge on the Merced River. The project, known as the Robinson Reach Phase, will cover the two uppermost reaches of the Merced River Salmon Habitat Enhancement Project and an adjacent 2,000-foot upstream reach.

Funding for the project comes from the Delta Pumping Plant Fish Protection (four pumps) Agreement (CDWR/ CDFG), CALFED Bay-Delta Program, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Anadromous Fish Restoration Program, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, Wildlife Conservation Board, Proposition 70, Tracy Fish Facility Direct Loss Mitigation Agreement, Integrated Storage Investigations - Fish Passage Improvement Program and Robinson Cattle Company. Support for the project comes from many State, federal and local agencies, landowners and stakeholder groups.

Historically, the Merced River supported spring and fall-run Chinook salmon and steelhead trout. Today, the river supports only fall-run Chinook and, on occasion, steelhead. The number of salmon in the lower Merced River has

varied from a 1985 high of 23,000 to a 1991 low of fewer than 100.

Smaller enhancement projects and improved management techniques helped the salmon population rise to more than 11,000 in 2000. Greater population increases are constrained by poor spawning habitat, due to degraded channel geomorphology, low flows, poor water quality, high water temperatures, and predation of smolts by warm water fish.

The goal of this phase is to benefit Merced River salmon by creating a more natural and self-sustaining river. Filling in ponds created by prior gravel extraction will eliminate predator habitat and salmon spawning and rearing habitat will be improved by reconfiguring the channel. This project will restore significant spawning habitat that was destroyed in the 1997 floods. Prior to the flood, up to 25 percent of the total Merced River salmon spawning occurred in this reach.

River and floodplain function will be improved by scaling the channel to fit the post-New Exchequer dam flow regime. The channel will be designed to include riffles and pools, constructed floodplains will be replanted with native riparian vegetation and, for diversity, the area will contain simulated abandoned channels and backwater channels.

Maintenance plans for the project are long term, and include coarse gravel augmentation and a 290 acre conservation easement.

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*The Department of Water Resources operates and maintains the State Water Project, provides dam safety and flood control and inspection services, assists local water districts in water management and water conservation planning, and plans for future statewide water needs.*

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