

California Department of Water Resources



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MERCED RIVER SALMON HABITAT ENHANCEMENT PROJECT PASSES HALFWAY MARK

MERCED - State Department of Water Resources officials reported today that a major effort with the California Department of Fish and Game to enhance salmon habitat along the Merced River has passed the halfway point.

Known as the Robinson Reach Phase of the Merced River Salmon Habitat Enhancement Project, the work covers two miles just upstream of the Highway 59 bridge. The goal is to benefit salmon by restoring 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.

"Restoration on this scale is exciting," said DWR San Joaquin District Chief Paula Landis. "In the past, restoration efforts were directed at habitat for a single species and often for a single life stage of that species, such as spawning habitat for adult fall-run Chinook salmon. Now that many groups have joined forces, we have the opportunity to design restoration projects that address the ecosystem as a whole. This project creates aquatic, terrestrial and wetland habitat for both plants and animals and helps the river sustain those habitats."

Benefits of the work will include restoring significant spawning habitat that was destroyed in 1997 flooding, reported Kevin Faulkenberry, Project Manager for DWR. Before the flood, up to 25 percent of the total Merced River salmon spawning occurred in the Robinson 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.

Ford Construction Company Inc., of Lodi began work on the \$2.8 million contract July 9 and expects completion by the end of October. "We're running a little ahead of schedule," said Ford Project Manager Jerry Middleton. "Things are also going very well environmentally. We've saved a lot more trees and river area vegetation than we originally expected."

Funding for the project comes from the Delta Pumping Plant Fish Protection (four pumps) Agreement (DWR/DFG), 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 have been limited by poor spawning habitat from degraded channel geomorphology, low flows, poor water quality, high water temperatures, and predation of smolts by warm water fish.

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