Yolo County Flood Control & Water Conservation District

Effective Water Resource Management

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Yolo County Healthy Rivers and Landscapes Initiative

July 2024

Summary

Yolo County Flood Control and Water Conservation District (District) is proposing a creative plan for supporting salmon recovery and groundwater resiliency as an alternative to the State's proposal to reallocate a substantial portion of Cache Creek water to Delta outflow. The District is engaging growers and rural property owners, tribal leaders and local government partners, environmental and civic organizations to share the proposal, inviting creative suggestions and cooperation to make the project work, and encouraging partners to support the proposal.

Historical context

The District has not historically been required to release stored water to support outflows for San Francisco Bay-Delta water quality and fisheries.

- In 1995, the State Water Resources Control Board concluded that Cache Creek flows didn't reach the Delta during the months when it was most needed for environmental purposes.
- Cache Creek, an intermittent and warm-water stream with no significant historic salmon population, often terminates into a settling basin designed to catch sediments ladened with mercury.
- A flow of 600 cubic feet per second below the Capay Dam would have to be maintained just for water to make it through the west side of the Yolo Bypass, which connects to the Delta.

The State Water Board's proposed requirement

In September 2023, the staff of the State Water Resources Control Board (State Water Board) proposed that the District be required to release for Delta outflow 55 percent of Cache Creek's "unimpaired flows" (the amount of water that would naturally flow down the creek if Indian Valley and Clear Lake dams had not been constructed).

- The State Water Board for years has been considering the 55 percent unimpaired flow requirement for the major tributaries to the San Francisco Bay-Delta, including

the Sacramento, Feather and American rivers. The September 2023 report was the first time the state agency proposed imposing that requirement on the Cache Creek watershed and the District.

The 55 percent unimpaired flow requirement would substantially reduce the amount of water that could be diverted from Clear Lake, Indian Valley Reservoir, and Cache Creek for upstream communities and agricultural production in Yolo County. In wet and above normal years, 10,000 acre-feet of water on average would be reallocated to outflow. In below normal years, 45,000 acre-feet on average would be allocated to outflow. In a typical year, the district diverts about 150,000 acre-feet for small communities, farms and groundwater recharge.

- The reduced diversions from Cache Creek would mean more groundwater pumping in most years, contributing to more dry wells, subsidence and harm to groundwater dependent ecosystems.
- The reduced diversions also would reduce the recharge of groundwater that occurs through the district's unlined canals, further exacerbating groundwater problems.
- The additional pumping and reducing recharge would increase the potential that groundwater pumping would need to be restricted.
- The additional flow requirements would significantly reduce the ability of Indian Valley Reservoir and the groundwater aquifer to provide water supplies in future droughts, which are expected to be longer and more frequent due to climate change.

How much water would be lost?

Applying the 55 percent unimpaired flow requirement to the hydrology of the last 94 years reveals the impact:

- Diversions would have been reduced in 54 years of the 94 years.
- In 22 years, diversions would have been reduced by 50,000 acre-feet or more – more than one-third annual diversions.
- In 14 years, diversions would have been reduced by more than one-half.
- Reduced diversions would occur in several consecutive years.
- Reduced diversions of nearly 140,000 acre-feet per year in three-year period.

- The declining groundwater will impact rural residents, small towns and potentially the conjunctive management of the water systems for Woodland, Davis, and UC Davis.
- Reduced diversions would impact water supplies for the Geysers carbon-free electricity generators, Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation, and disadvantaged communities on Clear Lake.

While the higher flows would exact an enormous cost, the evidence is scant that the additional outflow will provide meaningful improvement to Delta water quality or aquatic species.

Sacramento Valley waters leaders have been advancing a better way

Most of the water districts in the Sacramento Valley have been pursuing an alternative to the State Water Board's plan – the Healthy Rivers and Landscapes Initiative – that has been supported by Governors Brown and Newsom:

- Each of the major watersheds has agreed to provide more water for instream flows – and restore habitat in and along streams to address the needs of fish that flows alone cannot provide.
- The proposals call for shared governance in which local water agencies will work with tribal leaders, state and federal water and wildlife agencies, and conservation organizations to monitor conditions, agree on habitat and other improvements, and assess progress to support a shared understanding of issues and accelerate learning to accelerate recovery.
- Solano County Water Agency has been a part of the Healthy Rivers and Landscapes Initiative, building upon its work with other local partners to restore salmon in Putah Creek downstream of Monticello Dam and Lake Berryessa.

Yolo is proposing a better way to advance three priorities at the same time

For these reasons, the District has worked with the Solano County Water Agency and California Department of Water Resources and has consulted with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife and UC Davis fishery biologists to develop a proposal that would simultaneously advance three high-level state priorities: ***recovery of the salmon species, sustainable management of groundwater,*** and ***climate resiliency***.

- To support salmon recovery in Putah Creek, the District would provide up to 5,000 acre-feet of water between November and April when it would most benefit the fish. The water could come from Cache Creek winter diversions, from Cache Creek water stored in the aquifer, and potentially from winter slough drainage stored in the aquifer.
- In turn, the State would issue the District a permanent right to divert water during high winter flows to recharge groundwater for both agricultural and environmental purposes. This additional recharge would help Yolo County mitigate the impact of climate change on the environment, agriculture, small communities, and rural residents.
- The district would spend $300,000 a year on habitat improvements, which could be integrated into rechange projects.
- The State would provide $6.725 million for infrastructure improvements that would increase water supply reliability and groundwater recharge, enabling salmon recovery and climate resiliency activities.

Next Step #1: State Water Board approval

The State Water Board needs to approve the Healthy Rivers and Landscapes Initiative, including Cache Creek and the District, as an alternative to the onerous 55 percent unimpaired flows.

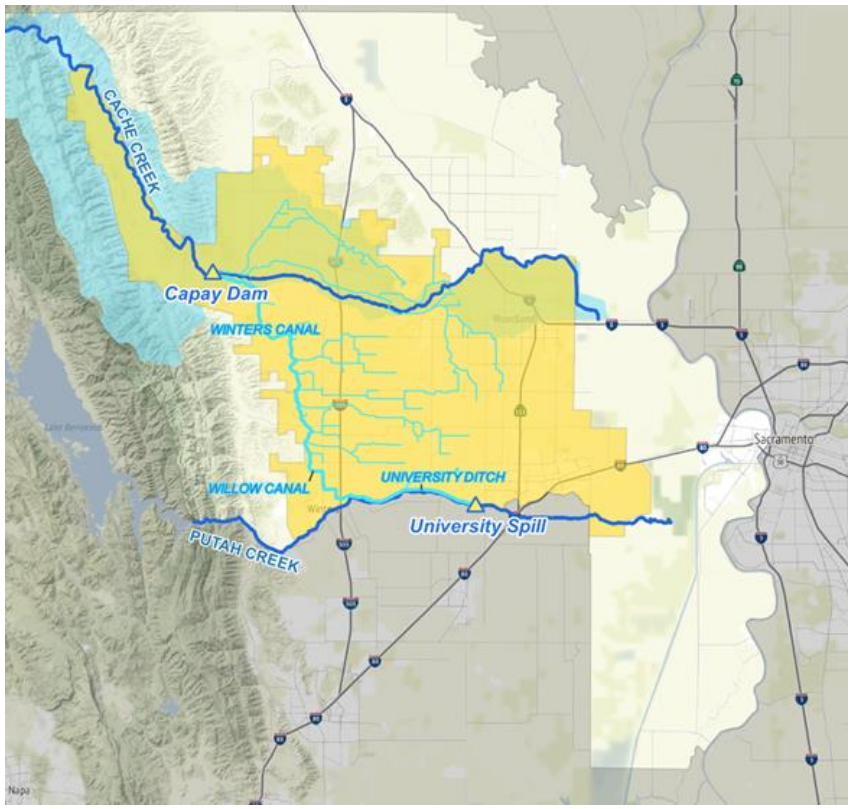
- The State Water Board is planning to release a revised plan that includes the District's proposal for contribution to Putah Creek salmon as an alternative to the 55 percent unimpaired flow requirement.

- The District encourages all community partners to support the Cache-Putah Resiliency proposal during the public comment period in August and September 2024.

Next Step #2: Design our future

The Yolo community – growers and rural residents, biologists and environmentalists, local and tribal governments – need to work cooperatively and creatively to develop ways to increase groundwater recharge, provide additional water to Putah Creek, restore habitat and reduce nuisance drainage problems.

- The District anticipates engaging the community on these issues in the coming months.



YCFC&WCD's Service Area and Canal System: Capay Diversion Dam diverts flows from Cache Creek and Winters, Willow, and University Canals deliver flows to Putah Creek.

For additional information, please contact Kristin Sicke at ksicke@ycfcwcd.org or 530.662.0265 (ext. 112).