EXCHANGE perspective

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2023
Q1 Newsletter

541 H St. - Los Banos, CA 93635

An informational newsletter for water users and landowners in the San Joaquin River Exchange Contractors' service area.

Message from Executive Director Chris White

As we begin 2023, we want to provide our members and the public with an update on the latest with our organization and some of the issues we are working on.

During the height of the drought conditions last year, we received a request from the Bureau of Reclamation in October to open renegotiations on the Exchange Contract, which has underpinned the system of water supply and infrastructure development in the Central Valley for almost 90 years.

We are optimistic that the rainfall we have received and the snowpack that has accumulated will help to mitigate the drought we have faced, but we recognize the seriousness of the challenges posed by the drought and the many complicated trade-offs with managing it. The Exchange Contractors have long had a productive working relationship with the Bureau of Reclamation, and we are always willing to work creatively to address the ongoing drought. For the Exchange Contract to be modified, both the Exchange Contractors and the Bureau of Reclamation would need to jointly and mutually agree to any changes.

We are in conversations with Reclamation, and while we are not willing to agree to change the Exchange Contract, we are continuing to seek creative and collaborative solutions for reliable regional water supplies while advocating in support of our farmers, our communities, and our economy. This includes a comprehensive drought program for south of the Delta to prepare our region for years to come, which we are optimistic we will be able to agree to and help implement.

We will of course continue to keep our Board, our members, and the public updated as decisions are made because we know how critical this issue is to the countless individuals who depend on the Exchange Contract.

The Latest on Water Conditions

In California, our weather patterns can quickly shift from one extreme to another. Just look at the last 10 years. We've had five dry years—2014, 2015, 2020, 2021 and 2022—where the state and federal water supply were greatly reduced. Local aquifers pumped down water to help meet demands, reservoir levels fell, and river flows were low. There have been two very wet years—2017 and 2019—where water was abundant, the rivers and creeks experienced flood flows, groundwater was recharged, reservoirs filled, and our system of rivers ran with natural, good quality water. We have had three average years wherein the present regulatory system in California made water supplies a challenge for many in California.

We have started 2023 with the promise of another wet year. Since Christmas, California has experienced a series of storms, or "Atmospheric Rivers" in the modern vernacular, which have resulted in as much as 25 inches of precipitation in some Northern California and Sierra Mountain locations, and over five inches locally.

What a difference a few weeks can make in California. The local creeks are suddenly back flowing, providing many benefits while at the same time risking damage to property. Los Banos Creek flows have filled the Los Banos Creek Detention Dam, which has been releasing flood flows down the creek providing the City of Los Banos and the local area with significant groundwater recharge.

This is important because the creek recharge is a significant contributor to the long term water supply of Los Banos. The flood control project that built the Los Banos Creek Detention Dam in the early 1960's has provided additional indirect water supply benefits to the area. Detention Dams by design store the peak of storm runoff events and then release them later, after the storm peak has passed. In other words, creek flows stay in the creek longer than they would have naturally, creating even more recharge benefits.

In just these few weeks, San Joaquin River flows into Millerton have forced flood releases into the river. The flood flows from Millerton Lake flow down the river through areas under the watch of our local water districts and flood control districts. We work to coordinate flood flow operations through the Mendota Pool and downstream. In fact, the local Central California Irrigation District, San Luis Canal Company, Firebaugh Canal Company, Columbia Canal Company and San Luis Water District are in flood watch operations along the river and on the local westside creeks, working with our local communities to safely pass flood flows through the system while maximizing recharge to groundwater for water supply benefits.

Stepping back and looking at the bigger picture, flood flows from the Sacramento and San Joaquin River systems are flowing into the Delta. In fact, Delta outflow has averaged about 85,000 cubic feet per second (cfs) over the last seven days. To put it in plain English, that is enough water to fill the entire two million acre-feet San Luis Reservoir in about twelve days.

The present circumstance certainly reinforces the need for additional storage facilities for this region to take advantage of wet periods like these. Projects like the proposed raising of San Luis Reservoir or the construction of Del Puerto Canyon Reservoir near Patterson would combine to provide about 220,000 acre-feet of additional storage. That is water that could be stored now and used in the next drought period.

In the meantime, we will track the hydrology and water operations as they continue to develop this spring. It is nice to be working with a promising beginning to the water year and we are likely looking at a much better water supply year with decent water supply allocations locally. After the last couple of years, this is a major relief.

Update on Major Projects

The Exchange Contractors have long been at the forefront of conservation and sustainability efforts. As we face a drier climate with more intense wet years, we know we need to continue investing in new capture, storage, and sustainability projects to prepare for the future.

Del Puerto Canyon Reservoir Project

The Del Puerto Canyon Reservoir Project is a critically important water conservation and storage project that is proposed to be built west of Patterson and south of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. The Exchange Contractors, in partnership with Del Puerto Water District, will construct and operate the project. When completed, the 800-acre reservoir will store up to 82,000 acre-feet of water.

In November, we received a positive Superior Court ruling that largely dismissed a CEQA challenge and upheld our ability to move forward with minor changes. We will continue to work with our partners and other stakeholders to ensure the success of the project.

Los Banos Creek Projects

We are working closely with a number of partner organizations to propose three new ways of more effectively managing Los Banos Creek to maximize water storage opportunities and water availability in the region.

The Los Banos Creek Detention project would allow us to release water from the Dam starting in the late-fall to early winter through March of the following year. During this time, roughly 8,000 acre-feet of water would be released for uses downstream. The Exchange Contractors and our partners would then refill the Dam with 8,000 acre-feet of replacement water from other sources such as groundwater. This allows for more annual water to be stored and released by the Dam, increasing the net capacity of the facility, promoting resilience, and benefitting the surrounding community.

Additionally, we're working on the installation of a *diversion structure* that would allow water flows between Los Banos Creek into the Delta-Mendota Canal and back again. In wet periods, the facility would allow for water to be delivered from the canal to the creek in order to recharge creek flows. The benefit to this is the ability to better manage flood control and increase water reliability, as well as improve recreational access on the creek.

Finally, we're proposing a new water storage location that will provide a long-term solution to some existing challenges relating to flooding, drought, and subsidence.

The Los Banos Creek Recharge and Recovery Project will receive water from the San Joaquin and Kings Rivers; Los Banos Creek; and surface flows from SJRECWA and our partners to be stored for future use. This will be done by creating a series of storage basins and recharge ponds, as well as accompanying infrastructure to facilitate water flows, with a total capacity of 17,000 acre feet.

We were proud to host State Senator Anna Caballero for a tour of some of our major infrastructure projects, including Del Puerto Canyon Reservoir, Orestimba Creek Project, and Sack Dam.

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San Joaquin River Exchange
Contractors Water Authority

PO Box 2115
Los Banos, CA 93635

Tel: 209.827.8616
Email: contactus@sjrecwa.net
Website: www.sjrecwa.net

Towards the end of last year, we hosted fellows from the California Agricultural Leadership Foundation and toured major infrastructure projects to discuss sustainability, innovation, and future approaches to resource management.