



2024
Q2 Newsletter

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

EXCHANGE perspective

JULY 2024

Working Together on Drought Year Planning



The severe droughts we have seen in recent years were yet another reminder of just how critical it is that we continue to invest in new infrastructure to capture and store water to prepare for future dry years. At the same time, we also need to work collaboratively today to make the most of the resources we currently have.

Last month, we took a major step to do just that. The Exchange Contractors are proud to announce a new partnership along with the Bureau of Reclamation, Friant Water Authority, and San Luis & Delta-Mendota Water Authority to implement a South of Delta Drought Resiliency Framework.

In short, this agreement marks a new level of collaboration between the three agencies involved that will see us voluntarily agree to set aside and store a portion of our annual water deliveries for later use in dry years. It includes new investments and financial commitments for infrastructure projects to implement the agreement, including the Delta-Mendota Canal Subsidence Correction Project, and the Los Banos Creek Detention Dam Increased Storage Project. Importantly, this voluntary agreement achieves these goals while maintaining long-standing and historic water rights.

There are significant environmental benefits to the agreement, which include financial commitments from the Bureau and the

Exchange Contractors to advance the goals of the San Joaquin River Restoration Program to ensure the San Joaquin River flows past Sack Dam to Mendota Pool.

Additionally, the three agencies have agreed to resolve previous disputes relating to the Del Puerto Canyon Reservoir Project. As I've written before in this column, 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. It will help promote water reliability and environmental sustainability by creating the capacity to store 82,000 acre-feet of water, while solving the issue of reoccurring flooding in surrounding areas.

I would like to thank our partner agencies for their hard work over many months to make this agreement a reality, as well as the Bureau of Reclamation for their commitment and resources, Reclamation Commissioner Camille Calimlim Touton and Regional Director Ernest Conant for their leadership, Senator Alex Padilla and Representative Jim Costa for their support, and our Board of Directors for their engagement.

For years, the Exchange Contractors have worked to help find solutions that benefit all water users in the Central Valley. The South of Delta Drought Resiliency Framework, and

the work that we continue to do today, will mean that we are more prepared with a more resilient water system when dry times come again.

This agreement shows what we can accomplish when we come together and work collaboratively to set aside our disagreements and focus on the areas where we can all benefit from working in

partnership. I have said before that disputes relating to water are too often framed as a zero-sum game in which someone wins and someone loses. But there is so much more opportunity for us to work together in a way where everyone can benefit, and I hope that this agreement is just one example of many more such collaborations to come.

Giving Back – The Community Infrastructure Fund

The Exchange Contractors have been deeply intertwined with our local communities going back generations to the early days working alongside towns and organizations on water resource management to more recent efforts in regional infrastructure development. Our collaborative projects with local towns have helped build a resilient and thriving Central Valley, addressing various issues from water management to public health.

In continuance of this longstanding history, I am proud to announce the launch of our new Community Infrastructure Fund. This initiative is designed to support and empower local communities through financial investments to foster sustainable growth and resilience in our region.

Starting this year, our organization will allocate up to two percent of our annual Net Transfer Revenue to the Community Infrastructure Fund. These resources will be used to provide grants for a range of regional projects and initiatives, focusing on projects important to the well-being and development of our communities.

We invite proposals from community organizations, non-profits, and local government bodies. Eligible projects should aim to make a significant impact in the following areas:

- **Water Resource Development, Management, and Conservation**
- **Renewable Energy and Electric Power Infrastructure**
- **Recreational Facility Development**
- **Sewage Treatment Infrastructure**
- **Flood Protection Works**

Priority for funding will be given to projects within the service areas of our four Member Entities: Central California Irrigation District, San Luis Canal Company, Firebaugh Canal Water District, and Columbia Canal Company, including but not limited to: Mendota, Firebaugh, Dos Palos, Los Banos, Gustine and Newman. However, we will also consider proposals that benefit the broader community beyond these boundaries but have a direct impact on our service regions.

Interested applicants are encouraged to submit their proposals by August 9, 2024. Proposals should detail how the project aligns with the authorized uses of funds and the expected benefits for the community. Detailed submission guidelines and application forms will be available at www.sjrecwa.net/community.

All applications will be reviewed thoroughly by our Community Infrastructure Committee, with final decisions made by our Board of Directors. Applicants can expect to receive notification by September 27, 2024.

This new fund represents our continued commitment to investing in the future of our communities. We believe that collaboration makes our region stronger, and we are dedicated to supporting those who are doing good work in our community. While we continue to make significant investments in infrastructure and sustainability, we also want to recognize and support others who are also working to advance these priorities. We look forward to receiving innovative and impactful proposals that will help us build a brighter and more sustainable future for the Central Valley.

For more information, please visit our website or contact our office directly at (209) 827-8616.

An Update on the San Joaquin River Restoration Program

Debates over water in California have too often been framed as “either/or” questions, where one group wins at the expense of another. This approach not only leads to hard feelings and unnecessary combativeness, but also limits our ability to find true compromises—ones that provide positive, workable solutions for everyone involved and not just sacrifices.

Take the San Joaquin River Restoration Program (SJRRP) as an example.

As a quick history, portions of the San Joaquin River would remain dry for part of the year following the completion of Friant

Dam. This negatively impacted Spring-run Chinook Salmon, which depend on moving throughout the river for spawning. The government, agricultural organizations, and environmental groups were involved in an almost two-decade long legal dispute relating to these issues.

In 2006, the parties involved agreed on a settlement, the SJRRP, with the dual goals of restoring river flows to maintain the salmon population below the Friant Dam while maintaining reliable water management for users dependent on Friant Dam. While our organization, the San Joaquin River Exchange Contractors,

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were not involved in the lawsuit, we came on board following the settlement to provide technical and engineering support.

The agreement involved commitments from the federal government for project funding, commitments from water users to allocate a portion of their flows for restoration, and a commitment from environmental interests to drop legal action and work in concert with the program.

Today, we remain committed to meeting the goals of the SJRRP despite significant ongoing challenges. Our member agency, Central California Irrigation District, is involved in the design process for a control structure in the Mendota Pool. When complete, it will allow water to flow into the Mendota Pool for deliveries by utilizing a fish screen so that migrating salmon will stay in the main river and not enter the Pool. This connection for the river is vital for the salmon but will also allow the water deliveries needed to continue, without significant interruptions for either use. CCID is currently working toward 90% completion on the design process and hoping to have it complete and ready to go to bid for construction later this year.

Down at Sack Dam, another one of our member agencies, San Luis Canal Company, is working closely with Reclamation to install a diversion facility with another fish screen to Arroyo Canal. This will allow for canal operations to continue while maintaining spawning fish passage uninterrupted through the River. This project is also advancing toward 90% completion on design, and SLCC is working closely with the Bureau of Reclamation to see it through.

These are just a couple of many more projects that are underway, which when complete will replicate a more natural flow pattern along the San Joaquin River that both protects the habitat of fish populations while still allowing for the needed water deliveries through the region.

However, the progress that has been made has been slower than anyone involved would like, and the reality is that delays resulting from design changes have consequences, namely increased costs. During this time of inflation, further delays will only result in additional expenses in the future. We're hopeful that we will see a renewed sense of urgency shared by all parties involved to finally get designs approved, projects fully funded, and construction underway.

This is not an easy process but progress has been made and importantly there is general agreement as to the necessity and benefit of the project. What is needed now is a collective commitment to secure the necessary funding to fully complete these projects, make decisive decisions that allow everyone to move forward past design phases and into construction, and avoid future delays that will only exacerbate the challenges we face now into the future.

The San Joaquin River Restoration Program is a testament to what we can accomplish when we work to find common ground despite our differences to solve the issues we collectively face. After years of talk, it is time for us to show that we can not only find agreement, but also implement solutions.

Support for Disadvantaged Communities

One could spend a lifetime learning the intricacies of California's water systems and the countless claims and agreements that have coalesced into the structure we have today. It is complicated, yes, but it also exemplifies how interconnected and interdependent we are throughout the region and the state. Despite the disagreements we often see among neighbors that play out in the media, we are at our best when we are fostering cooperation between different water users.

Take for example the city of Dos Palos. Through the 1980s, Dos Palos received its water supply through the Central California Irrigation District's canal system, a member agency of the Exchange Contractors, to a turnout within the Dos Palos city limits. That water was treated and then delivered to the city. Dos Palos eventually secured a grant to build a pipeline and a treatment plant to receive water from the California Aqueduct, at which point they abandoned the connection to the Exchange Contractors canal and plugged it off.

This system worked well until 2015, when the growth of moss and contaminants clogged the treatment plant. Though they were able to fix the issue, it reemerged in 2022, causing the city to be without water for an extended period. Luckily, there was enough institutional knowledge to remember the old canal connection still existed and could be reestablished to provide a water source for the city until the issue was addressed. Though the water was not suitable for drinking, it sufficed for essential needs during the crisis. Today, Dos Palos is in the process of improving the treatment plant to avoid this issue in the future, but the spirit of collaboration and support remains.

Two of our other neighbors, the cities of Mendota and Firebaugh, are classified as severely disadvantaged communities by the State of California. Both are entirely dependent on groundwater but have faced challenges with their groundwater quality. Mendota's wells have faced increasingly poor water quality resulting from migration of poor quality groundwater and the water quality within the city and upstream of Firebaugh is highly degraded.

We worked closely with both cities on a solution. A dozen years ago, another of our member agencies, Columbia Canal Company (CCC), made an arrangement with Mendota to establish wells on the east side of the river in a location where significantly higher groundwater quality exists sustainably into the future. This location is outside of the city's boundary but within CCC's area. Years earlier a similar arrangement was implemented between the City of Firebaugh and CCC. Both arrangements have been significantly beneficial to water users in these disadvantaged communities.

It is true that we are increasingly facing decreased water availability in the Central Valley because of climate and regulatory changes. While many may instinctively react by trying to protect what is theirs at the expense of others, the reality is that we are collectively better off when we seek solutions that benefit all of us.

This will require collaboration to increase the capture, recharge, and storage of water for later use during dry periods. It means working together on drought year plans like one we are developing for south of the Delta with multiple groups agreeing to set aside water to prepare for drought years. And it means finding common ground as neighbors and partners to find solutions rather than opportunities for division.



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A big thank you to everyone who joined up for the San Luis Canal Company Shareholder Lunch!