



2025
Q4 Newsletter

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

EXCHANGE perspective

DECEMBER 2025

This Year in Water

By Chris White, Executive Director

As we wrap up the 2025 water year, it's a good time to take stock of where we stand. Rainfall and runoff into Shasta Lake were above normal this year, totaling 6.7 million acre-feet compared to the long-term average of 5.5 million. Early forecasts in February already signaled a strong inflow season, and the year ultimately delivered a full, non-critical allocation for the Exchange Contractors.

Yet despite the above-average rainfall, many of our Central Valley Project agricultural neighbors received only a 55% allocation. This partial allocation in a year with good rainfall is another clear reminder of the need to base system operations and constraints on the best available science, rather than simply continuing to do things as they've always been done. At the same time, we need to move forward on projects that strengthen drought resiliency, increase supply, and improve regional water management. We understand how challenging that can be and are reminded once again of the importance of working together to advance long-term solutions that

improve water reliability across the Valley.

That includes efforts like groundwater recharge, additional surface storage, conveyance improvements, and local infrastructure upgrades—all of which can be achieved while maintaining environmental protections and supporting water users throughout the Central Valley.

In addition to ongoing operations, we are focused on helping local agencies and partners navigate the rapidly evolving federal and state landscape. With ongoing shifts in policy and process, it's more important than ever that we interpret these changes clearly, identify practical opportunities, and ensure that good projects move forward.

Another water year is behind us, and while the conditions change, our mission remains the same. We are working to provide stability and leadership in an unpredictable system while pursuing both near- and long-term approaches to improve the system as a whole. By continuing to plan, build, and collaborate, we can create the resilient water future our members, partners, and surrounding communities deserve.

Los Banos Creek Progress

Construction is underway on the Los Banos Creek Detention Project, which will allow us to release water from the Los Banos Detention 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 can be released for use downstream and will subsequently refill the Dam with 8,000 acre-feet of replacement water from other sources. This allows for more annual water to be stored and released, increasing the net capacity of the facility.

There are multiple benefits to this plan. First, it will increase the natural flows of Los Banos Creek, which plays an important role in the ecological health of the Los Banos community. This additional water flow will help restore the aquifers in and around Los Banos, which are recharged by the flow of the creek, as

well as restore groundwater in the area. The annual release of water from the Dam will provide more reliable water to the Los Banos groundwater aquifer downstream, especially in dry years. It will also provide a new water supply source for agricultural use, stabilize the water levels at the Dam, while simultaneously increasing flood protection for Los Banos.

The project increases sustainability and resilience while benefiting the nearby community of Los Banos, water users, and the largest contiguous wetlands water supply, all without having to create new infrastructure, by simply improving the management of our existing resources.

Construction is expected to complete in the first half of 2026.

Hosting the California Agricultural Leadership Foundation

Here in the Central Valley, we know that many of the region's most pressing problems — from how to capture, store and convey our water, to the need for innovative and sustainable solutions in the face of changing climate and regulations — will not be solved overnight and will necessitate responsible leaders making smart and informed decisions over multiple generations.

That is why the San Joaquin River Exchange Contractors place such high importance on supporting and educating California's aspiring agricultural leaders. The people who will sit at the table making decisions tomorrow need both a clear understanding of the obstacles we face and the vision to craft innovative, sustainable solutions.

In August, we were honored to once again host fellows from the California Agricultural Leadership Foundation (CALF), an advanced leadership development program that equips the next generation of leaders in the agricultural industry with essential knowledge of the field.

Over the course of two days, the group toured critical infrastructure projects and learned of the existing challenges — and innovative solutions — facing the Central Valley and the agriculture industry.

We heard from leaders like Joe Del Bosque and Case and Darcy Vlot, who shared what they have learned in running their respective farms, the ways that they have overcome challenges through collaboration with their neighbors in the Valley, and the importance of telling our story both locally and through the press.

We toured the Los Banos Detention Dam, San Luis National Wildlife Refuge and Mendota Dam where participants were able to see successful strategies for water conservation and habitat restoration.

One focal point of the day was an education about the San Joaquin River Restoration Program, which is an example of how we can use modern technology and intensive resource management to both protect fish populations and ensure growers receive the water they are promised.

The first day finished with a panel discussion featuring Adam Nickels, Acting Regional Director, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation's Great Basin, and John Yarbrough, Deputy Director, California Department of Water Resources, who together helped give a better lay of the land of water operations and how decisions at the federal and state levels are impacting California's water operations and initiatives.

On day two, we toured two sites that are essential to managing the region's water and protecting vital and endangered species in the ecosystem — the C.W. Bill Jones Pumping Plant and the Tracy Fish Facility.

The group also visited the Del Puerto Canyon Reservoir Project site, which the Exchange Contractors are proud to work with alongside our partner agency, Del Puerto Water District, and heard from their General Manager, Anthea Hansen.

Once complete, the project will store up to 82,000 acre-feet of water in the 800-acre reservoir — providing critically needed water reliability and flood management in the region.

Together, we wrapped up the tour at San Luis Reservoir, where we discussed influential remarks given by President Kennedy at the 1962 groundbreaking of the facility and examined current and future modernization efforts.

We were especially excited to welcome U.S. Congressman Adam Gray (CA-13), who has been an ardent supporter of the agricultural industry and the Central Valley.

We appreciated him for taking the time to share his insights on how he has worked at the federal level to ensure projects and initiatives are not only funded but also able to be built quickly and efficiently without being bogged down in bureaucracy.

This event is always one of our highlights of the year. We take great pride in sharing our understanding of issues with leaders in our industry and helping them develop an even better understanding of the nuances of our region's challenges and the innovative solutions we are working on to address them.

After spending time with this cohort of future leaders, we feel confident and excited for the future of our industry and the Central Valley with these folks at the helm.



Community Infrastructure Fund

The Exchange Contractors are excited to announce the second cohort of our Community Infrastructure Fund, which supports and empowers local communities through grants for regional projects.

Following a successful first year running the program, we are excited to award five organizations more than \$600,000 in total grants under this year's program.

Each year, we plan to contribute up to two percent of our annual Net Transfer Revenue to give back to the community and support organizations making a positive impact in the region and equipping them with the resources they need to succeed.

This year's awardees will help revitalize schools, invest in critical infrastructure improvements, enhance our public and recreational spaces, and preserve our local history for generations to come here in the Central Valley.

For example, the City of Los Banos' H.G. Fawcett Canalside Trail Improvement Project will use their grant to enhance the walking trail to improve access and experience for residents. The project will create smooth and durable walking surfaces, and with an emphasis on ADA accessibility, the project will ensure the path can be enjoyed by everyone. We are excited to see how the trail transforms with these new improvements.

The City of Gustine will use their \$67,500 grant to improve road safety by replacing numerous severely degraded manholes. Replacing this critical infrastructure is a crucial step in preventing expensive repairs down the line or failures that could impact entire neighborhoods. This project will serve the community for generations and demonstrates the importance of proactively maintaining vital infrastructure.

The City of Firebaugh was selected for a \$190,000 grant to transform a stretch of the San Joaquin River Trail. This project will establish new amenities to transform the scenic area between the Poso Canal and 7th Street. The grant will support the construction of a shaded rest area complete with picnic facilities, drinking fountain, and solar lighting to create a space where families and friends can gather, joggers can pause for water, and to ensure the river is accessible to everyone who calls this region home.

Just down the road, the Firebaugh-Las Deltas Unified School District's Parking Expansion Project was selected to receive \$204,000 to invest in much-needed parking spaces at a local school to ensure the campus is accessible for students, staff and visitors. This project funding will now be fully met with roughly \$500,000 in additional funds from the School District. The money will create 120 new parking stalls at Firebaugh High School. It will also improve access points and build a fence around the school's perimeter to improve security. There is a high demand for parking during sporting events, and this project will allow for larger audiences and easier access to the school. This is an investment not just in the safety of the students, but in the spirit of the school.

We are also funding two Milliken Museum Society projects that help preserve our local water history for future generations. More than \$55,000 was awarded to the organization to digitize two local newspapers—the Westside Express and The Los Banos Enterprise—to transform archives that currently require a trip to Merced into resources accessible from any computer.

The organization was also awarded another \$10,000 to restore a century-old ownership map that tells the story of how our agricultural landscape took shape. Together, these projects will ensure that students researching family histories, residents exploring local water rights, and future generations seeking to understand their roots will have access to the stories that shaped our communities.

The Community Infrastructure Fund was created with the intent to give back to our communities and connect with the roots of our organization. After inviting a variety of community groups to apply in July, we were impressed by each of these initiatives' ideas to strengthen our region. All five grantees were carefully selected and reflect the Exchange Contractors' commitment to supporting the Central Valley and we look forward to seeing their impact on the region.

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FCWD Dedicates Solar Project Honoring Mike Stearns

The Firebaugh Canal Water District recently dedicated its new one-megawatt solar complex, a milestone project that will generate renewable electricity to power the District's three main pump stations. The project underscores FCWD's continued leadership in sustainability and innovation, reducing operational costs while improving long-term energy reliability for the region.

The complex was dedicated in honor of longtime FCWD Board President and Exchange Contractors Vice-Chair Mike Stearns, recognizing his three decades of service to the District and the Central Valley water community. His leadership and vision have been instrumental in advancing projects that strengthen local infrastructure and promote more resilient water management across the Exchange Contractors service area.

