

# San Joaquin tops list of endangered rivers in America (video)

BY MARK GROSSI

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The San Joaquin River is America's most endangered waterway this year, says the national advocacy group American Rivers, known for annually picking the country's 10 most troubled rivers.

The San Joaquin's water is spread too thin among farmers, hydroelectric projects and other uses on the mainstem and three tributaries, the Merced, Stanislaus and Tuolumne rivers, the group announced Wednesday in Washington, D.C.

For decades, the San Joaquin has been periodically dry for more than 60 miles northwest of Fresno, destroying salmon runs and parts of the river channel. A restoration project began nearly five years ago to reconnect the river with the Pacific Ocean and rebuild salmon runs.

But authorities must continue the fight to get past this dry year, said John Cain of American Rivers.

"The San Joaquin is at a tipping point," he said. "We need to maintain water releases from the tributaries for fish and water quality and continue the restoration project."

He added it's the first time the section near Fresno has been the most endangered on the list. The section was among the 10 most endangered rivers named in 1997. The lower section at the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta has twice been on the list with the Sacramento River.

The American Rivers list has no official clout, but it has been widely followed for more than 25 years. Last year, the Colorado River was the most endangered.

Cain noted the San Joaquin River restoration is getting no water in this epic drought year, the same as many area farmers. He said American Rivers supports help for farmers in this natural disaster, but the group does not want environmental laws set aside.

East San Joaquin Valley farmers, who use the river for irrigation, fought the restoration for 18 years before agreeing to give up some water for the project, which remains a sore spot for them.

People and agriculture in Central California continue to need the river as much as nature, said Merced County farmer Kole Upton.

"What about all the communities that are supported by the river?" he asked. "What about all the people who work at providing food for the country?"

More than 60 miles of the river dried up and salmon runs died after Friant Dam was built in the 1940s. For decades, the river's water nurtured farming and communities, such as Orange Cove.

Legal watchdog Natural Resources Defense Council filed the 1988 lawsuit that led to the restoration project. Senior NRDC scientist Monty Schmitt said the most endangered ranking highlights changes coming for San Joaquin restoration.

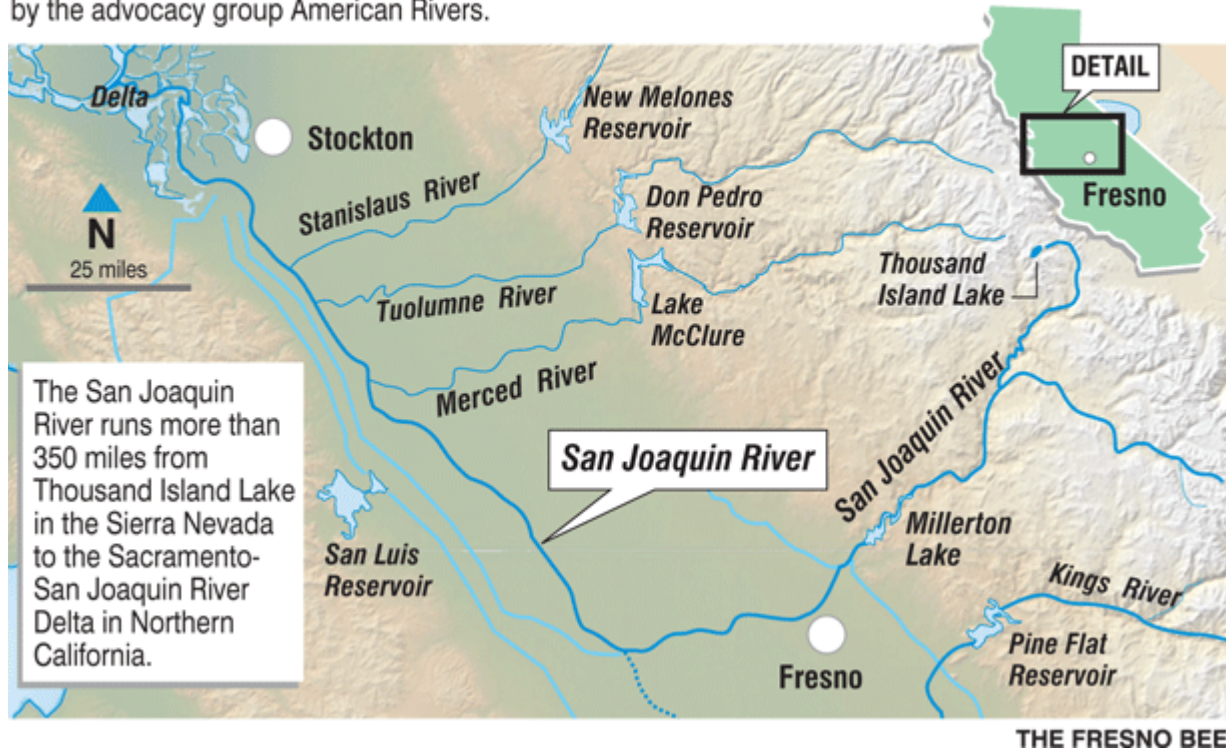
"We're moving from planning to implementation phases now," he said. "We've been able to adapt to this dry year by studying juvenile salmon in the river. I hope we never face another year like this, but we will know how the river reacts next time."

In Fresno, a leader of the San Joaquin River Parkway and Conservation Trust said he saw the endangered river ranking as a wakeup call. The parkway trust is helping to preserve land along the river for a 22-mile greenbelt from Friant Dam to Highway 99.

"This ranking is not something you want," said parkway trust executive director Dave Koehler. "But we need to build ecological health back into the river. Ecological health is as important to people as it is to fish."

# Endangered river

The San Joaquin has been named the most endangered river in the United States by the advocacy group American Rivers.



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