

Feds say San Joaquin River could reach ocean this year; farmers say it isn't close

By Mark Grossi

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Katrina Harrison, engineer with the Bureau of Reclamation, talks about restoration of the San Joaquin River at an old head gate on the dry river in Merced County. Video: John Walker THEFRESNOBEE

- Dates to remember
 - **1988:** Lawsuit filed by environmental and conservation groups, challenging federal contracts for water from the San Joaquin River.
 - **2006:** Restoration settlement signed by the federal government, east Valley farmers and environmentalists.
 - **2009:** Start of the river restoration.
 - **2010:** Restoration reconnection with the Pacific Ocean.
 - **2011:** First experiments returning chinook salmon to the river.

EL NIDO, Merced County — Stream gauges and monitoring wells are ready and waiting along the San Joaquin River. Big money has been spent for the right to let water flow through a private bypass. All that's missing now is water.

If the drought breaks by spring, the river should be ready to reconnect with the Pacific Ocean for the second time in the last six years, say federal officials who are [working on restoring the San Joaquin](#).

But, it's never that easy with this ambitious, \$1 billion project to bring back water and chinook salmon to a river that has been dry for dozens of miles for more than 60 years. It is considered one of the largest restoration projects in the country, and it has been plagued by lack of money, drought and continuing delay.

The river won't flow very fast if it is reconnected through the dried sections along the San Joaquin Valley's west side. It will be years before the channel is ready for big flows again.

West-side farmers along the river, worried about endangered salmon and seepage damage, argue it's far from ready

for any kind of flow.

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation still wrestles with potentially damaging river seepage along 23,000 acres of west San Joaquin Valley property. Officials figure it eventually will cost \$185 million to deal with the problem — buying easements, land and other remedies for seepage between Mendota and Merced County.

Area farmers haven't been satisfied with the bureau's progress.

Several projects, like fish screens to keep endangered fish from straying into irrigation canals, have not been finished. Farmers say it would be a nightmare if protected fish died in their canals. Farmer Cannon Michael said it would be unacceptable for the bureau to reconnect the river under these circumstances.

"Even if we are given environmental protection against any 'take' of endangered species, imagine the PR nightmare if there is some huge fish kill in the river due to the river not being ready for fish," he said. "The blow-back will be on us."

The restoration project has special protections in place for landowners who might inadvertently harm a protected species, said Alicia Forsythe, program manager for the bureau. Officials say they are working with farmers and landowners to prevent problems.

"We will start flows low to monitor for fish and ensure that there are no impacts to adjacent landowners," Forsythe said.

Seepage worry

Drought has prevented the bureau from releasing restoration flows from Friant Dam for the last year. But when the river was briefly connected with the ocean in 2010, landowners noticed losses in crop production because water had seeped underneath their fields, swamping roots.

Since then, the bureau has closely monitored the underground water levels with more than 200 wells, set up a seepage reporting system and begun a seepage management program to work with landowners.

In centuries past, the San Joaquin tended to spread out into many channels when it entered the Valley floor. Groundwater levels tend to be more shallow near the river's channel, so seepage from below is not surprising, engineers say.

Friant Dam was built in the 1940s, and the river's water was sent to east Valley growers to rescue a faltering farm economy on that side of the Valley. The river dried up on the west side. A 1988 environmental lawsuit challenging the loss of San Joaquin salmon runs eventually ended with [a restoration agreement in 2006](#).

Now, the restoration is mired in delay, including the bypass to help fish get around Mendota Dam, which has raised concerns about whether salmon reintroduction would be slowed.

Officials began experimenting in 2011 to re-establish salmon in the river, planting fish and tracking them through the system. But federal scientists have been forced to truck returning fish from one place to another because the river is not yet connected to the ocean.

To fix seepage problems out on the west side, the options include an interceptor line to capture water before it gets to the fields, slurry walls, shallow groundwater pumping or money from the bureau for an easement to allow the seepage, said bureau engineer Katrina Harrison.

"In one case, we bought about 400 acres from a farmer," she said. "We're now leasing the land to another farm operator who is growing alfalfa with the understanding that there is a risk of seepage here."

The field is at a sensitive place in Merced County, near the old Sand Slough Control Structure, which had helped

years ago to manage the flow at the Eastside Bypass, a massive flood control channel. The groundwater level there is only 10 feet below the surface right now, said federal hydrologist Stephen Lee.

“That’s actually pretty low,” he said. “It’s because of the drought. In past years, I’ve seen groundwater rise to actually sit on the surface at the corner of this field.”

The landowner was Tracy farmer David Pombo, who said he decided to just sell the land rather than fight the government over it.

“Fundamentally, I am not in favor of the government buying up more land,” he said. “But playing nice was a better way than trying to fight the government. It seemed like it was going to happen one way or another.”

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