

## Earth Log: Looking to where San Joaquin River died in 1960s

By Mark Grossi

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View of the old San Joaquin River channel, which was closed off in the 1960s. It is now choked with shrubs and trees.

MARK GROSSI — The Fresno Bee

In the chilly January fog, Bee photographer John Walker and I last week stood at a spot where the San Joaquin River died in the 1960s — the Sand Slough Control Structure in Merced County.

We were researching the [river restoration story](#) that published in Sunday's Bee. I didn't write about the control structure, but whenever I see it I wonder where the revived river will flow out here. Will it be in the old river channel or in the Eastside Bypass, a flood control channel?

To me, this is the most important hurdle among many important hurdles in the [\\$1 billion restoration project](#). Hundreds

of millions of dollars may be needed to make this work, one way or another.

The [control structure](#) is about 95 river miles downstream of Friant Dam in the west-side farm country. Los Banos is in the general neighborhood many miles to the west.

The structure helps create a fork between the main channel and the Eastside Bypass. Federal leaders have not decided yet which route the river will take. About five years ago the restoration sent water through the bypass as part of the experimental flows.

There will be challenges either way.

The old river route is shriveled and choked with shrubs and trees. Somebody built a house in the river channel several miles downstream. This route will have to be rebuilt, and landowners will have to be protected.

The Eastside Bypass, about 32 miles of large channel skirting the east side of the river, is privately owned. The owners worry that it would not be compatible with re-establishing salmon runs.

The bypass is mostly clear of big vegetation and wide open because it needs to carry a lot of flood water at times. But without vegetation, such a channel might heat up river water in warm weather. Salmon need cold water.

The Sand Slough Control Structure is in the 23,000 acres of land from Mendota to Merced County considered at risk for seepage damage along the San Joaquin Valley's west side. It's also where the land has been swiftly sinking, due to groundwater pumping during the drought.

The [U.S. Bureau of Reclamation](#) is working on many projects to rebuild this river for fish and to protect riverside landowners. But not one of the major projects has been finished yet.

The bureau is now pushing to get a small flow of restoration water through the river whenever the drought breaks, but landowners say water shouldn't flow until the river is ready.

Farmer Cannon Michael says landowners are not against the project. They just want it to work the way it was presented several years ago.

He told me: "True restoration cannot be a success unless the physical projects are done."

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