

San Joaquin River revival pushes deadlines back

By Mark Grossi
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Years late, the first major project of the San Joaquin River restoration is closer to liftoff with a \$326 million price tag and a load of political baggage.

The construction of a channel in west Fresno County around Mendota Dam is expected to begin in 2017 — four years after it was supposed to be finished. The bypass and channel widening won't be completed for a decade, officials estimate.

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation this month is unveiling plans and seeking public comment.

Nationally, this is an unprecedented project, reviving chinook salmon runs more than a half century after they died in a dried river. The Bureau of Reclamation, which is [running the project](#), couldn't meet the ambitious completion deadline of late 2013, officials say.

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federal program manager Alicia Forsythe

"We've spent more time working with willing local landowners to get a consensus," says program manager [Alicia Forsythe](#), who was in Fresno on Wednesday to present [the plan](#) to area residents and officials. "The engineering was very complicated. And we needed to wait for congressional legislation."

Bypassing the dam, which creates historic [Mendota Pool](#), is a linchpin in the restoration. This river section is among the most complex plumbing in all of California's heavily engineered water world.

It's a small pool where 1 million acre-feet of water passes most years, the majority of it from Northern California. The pool forms at the century-old dam in a wide spot where the region's two biggest rivers, the San Joaquin and Kings, periodically meet.

Revised plans now show the Mendota Dam bypass as well as expansion of floodplain along 11 river miles will be complete by 2025. But there will be more work and expense downstream in Merced County where the river has all but disappeared. That work will take place after the Mendota Dam bypass project.

Farmers doubt project

The updated cost estimates of the entire restoration have climbed from \$1 billion to \$1.5 billion, which includes \$300 million for levee work that the state would address.

The financial picture has always raised doubts among farmers who lost up to 200,000 acre-feet of river irrigation water in wetter years for the restoration. They fought a losing court battle against the project, finally signing a river restoration settlement in 2006.

The loss of irrigation water affects about 15,000 growers who buy river water from the [Central Valley Project at Millerton Lake](#). The river's water saved east San Joaquin Valley farming after the Bureau of Reclamation built Friant Dam was built in the 1940s.

Many east-side farmers are represented by the [Friant Water Authority](#), which signed the agreement. There is a strong feeling among growers that the restoration is underfunded and unwise.

“I think the restoration is a miserable failure,” says Tulare County farmer Mark Watte, who is a Friant board member. “I don’t think the project is getting the river in shape for salmon. We need to get back together and renegotiate to make this a more reasonable project. If not now, when?”

Environmental leaders say the restoration is working, and the return of a living river will make the San Joaquin Valley a vibrant, healthy place for both people and nature.

The [Natural Resources Defense Council](#), an environmental legal watchdog, has pushed for the restoration for decades. The NRDC applauds the project’s progress. Senior scientist Monty Schmitt, based in San Francisco, says federal scientists have learned much about the river from water releases that started in 2009 as well as experimental salmon releases.

He also says federal officials are getting riverside landowners and water officials involved in the bypass at Mendota Dam and nearby floodplain expansion.

“The projects exemplify the way the restoration program has taken additional years to work with local landowners and water districts to come up with a project they support that will provide water supply and flood protection in addition to restoring a living river for all Californians to enjoy,” he says.

Getting around the pool

Separating the Mendota Dam and pool from revived San Joaquin salmon runs will be important, federal officials say, because the water in the pool is mostly intended for irrigation.

Federal officials want to build a control structure with gates that will close off access to the Mendota Pool and send the flow into a channel connecting to the river downstream. Salmon need a continuous flow of water to move to and from the Pacific Ocean

The bypass channel will cover about 200 acres of land occupied by crops, such as alfalfa, program manager Forsythe says.

“The fish will just continue around the pool,” says Forsythe.

1 million acre-feet of water pass through the Mendota Pool in most years

The pool forms behind 386-foot-wide Mendota Dam, which was built in 1917. It’s nothing like a large dam, such as Friant Dam, in the Sierra foothills. At Mendota Dam, water is released through control gates — several of which are simply flashboards that are manually raised and lowered.

“It’s a small, regulating reservoir,” says bureau engineer Katrina Harrison. “Water passes through it.”

Though the Mendota Pool is on the San Joaquin, it is not getting San Joaquin water. In most years, the river stops upstream at Gravelly Ford, though there are exceptions in wet years and drought that forces federal officials to send San Joaquin water through the Mendota Pool area.

The drought exception has happened only once — last year. Water was sent from Friant Dam through the river to west-side farmers who have historic water rights but could not get water from Northern California.

That’s Northern California water

The Mendota Pool gets mostly Northern California river water from the [Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta](#) through the Delta-Mendota Canal. The imported water mostly goes to the west-side farmers with historic water rights to the San Joaquin River. They exchanged their water decades ago for Northern California river water.

In a further twist of complexity, Kings River water also sometimes funnels into the pool through the Fresno Slough.

The dam and pool are owned and operated by the Los Banos-based [Central California Irrigation District](#). CCID is among four districts in the [San Joaquin River Exchange Contractors Authority](#), representing the historic water-rights landowners who swapped their San Joaquin water for Northern California supplies.

“It’s very important to us that the Bureau of Reclamation get the plumbing right,” says CCID general manager Christopher White. “We’re working with them and we’re getting there, but we’re not there yet. We still have concerns.”

One concern is the lack of a fish screen to make sure salmon don’t accidentally stray from the San Joaquin into the Mendota Pool. Irrigation district officials worry about harming a protected species, such as the [spring-run chinook salmon](#).

Forsythe says the need for a fish screen is under analysis, but the screen protection may not be necessary. The San Joaquin River does not regularly connect with the pool, she says.

“We still need to see the detailed analysis,” she says. “We will look at all the facts.”

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