

# SYRCL's current mission

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The Union, by Matt Renda

The South Yuba River Citizens League was created to prevent the development of several dams on the South Yuba River.

The nonprofit organization achieved the mission set forth in its foundational charter when through its characteristic multi-pronged effort, it convinced the California state Legislature to grant Wild and Scenic status to a 39-mile stretch of the river.

Since then, SYRCL has continued to evolve its mission, identifying several political objectives, including restoring salmon to the upper reaches of the watershed, identifying and acting on impacts to fish health created by existing dams and opposing the closure of two local state parks.

However, the organization's leadership asserts political objectives pale in comparison to the organization's primary function: to harness the community's love for the river into positive action that leads to long-term stewardship of the Yuba and its surrounding environment.

"When I came here, the mission was to protect and restore the Yuba River, which is a wonderful goal and a wonderful mission in keeping with conservation organizations throughout the country," said SYRCL Executive Director Caleb Dardick. "But I looked at what SYRCL does and how we do it, and it wasn't accurate. So we rewrote it.

"Agriculture and hydropower need to be accommodated and respected. There are economic as well as environmental concerns, and that's a maturity that reflects being a 30-year organization."

"Now our mission is to unite the community to protect and restore the Yuba River."

As this morning's newspaper hits doorsteps and newsstands throughout western Nevada County, SYRCL will be putting the finishing touches on a intricately orchestrated clean-up operation that comprehensively addresses the Yuba and Bear River watershed. Today marks the 16th annual incarnation of the Yuba River Clean Up, which has included more than 6,800 volunteers who have collected and removed about 146,000 pounds of garbage and recyclables from sites stretching from Van Norden Meadows on Donner Summit to the lower reaches of the Yuba River.

"Love of the river transcends partisan and ideological identification," said John Regan, SYRCL board president.

After the California State Parks Department announced in May 2011 it intended to close 70 parks to save \$22 million over two years, including the South Yuba River State Park and Malakoff Diggins State Historic Park, SYRCL launched a petition drive. The organization

gathered more than 10,000 signatures and collected a contingent of local residents, schoolchildren and public leaders who shuttled to Sacramento to present the boxes of petitions to lawmakers in a show of support for local parks.

Dardick continues to advocate for the installation of a large solar project at Malakoff Diggins in order to cut costs and cease the expensive and dirty practice of running large diesel-powered generators at the site.

While SYRCL employs persuasive techniques to build consensus and achieve its conservation goals, the organization tenaciously asserts its environmental principles while reserving recourse to litigation when alternative avenues are exhausted, Dardick said.

Recently, SYRCL filed suit against the Army Corps of Engineers, claiming the branch of the armed forces failed to comply with Endangered Species Act requirements to protect the Yuba's salmon.

In 2012, the National Marine Fisheries Service, a federal agency dedicated to management of marine resources and their habitat, issued a biological opinion that declared the two Army Corps-managed dams on the South Yuba — the 24-foot Daguerre Point Dam and the 278-foot high Englebright Dam — were impeding the recovery of salmon, green sturgeon and steelhead, all of which are listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

In August, a federal judge ordered the fisheries service to issue a new biological opinion by 2014 after the Corps and the Yuba County Water Agency took issue with some of the science in the 2012 opinion.

“Although the judge did not vacate the 2012 (opinion), his ruling allows the Corps to continue to ignore most of the measures that fisheries service determined were necessary to avoid jeopardizing the fish species' existence and recovery,” Dardick said in August.

“On the other hand, we won a significant victory in the court's order setting a firm deadline for a new biological opinion.”

Janet Cohen, who was deputy executive director when SYRCL wrangled the designation of Wild and Scenic in 1999, recently said that the organization has credibility when it negotiates with parties that have a stake in the river.

“It was a 16-year fight and it was a great win,” Cohen said of procuring the Wild and Scenic designation. “Having shown our strength, it enabled us to sit down at the table with some of our former opponents.”

For instance, the Yuba County Water Agency, SYRCL and a bevy of other private and public agencies hammered out the Yuba Accord in 2006, which won awards and serves as a national model for how groups with apparently contradictory needs can locate common ground.

The accord provided for higher stream flows meant to abet better habitat for endangered species of fish while guarding the water rights of farmers in Yuba County.

“My experiences working with SYRCL while at YCWA has been relatively positive,” said YCWA Water Resources Manager Geoff Rabone in a recent email. “We work together whenever we can.”

Gary Reedy, SYRCL’s resident scientist, attends dam Federal Energy Regulatory Commission relicensing meetings, which are as important in the potential impacts to the community as they are complex.

Many of the hydroelectric and water diversion dams built in the 1960s were granted 50-year licenses by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, Reedy explained.

Two dams in the upper elevation portion of Nevada County, Nevada Irrigation District’s Yuba-Bear Hydroelectric Project and Pacific Gas & Electric’s Drum-Spaulding Project, were granted a license by the federal government in 1963.

The agencies are in the process of seeking licensing to operate for the next 50 years and SYRCL is taking the opportunity to attend the meetings to request changes ultimately beneficial to the watershed and its ecology.

Reedy has repeatedly asserted that the yeoman’s work is necessary, as the relicensing effort presents a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to improve river conditions.

He said he has been able to build consensus on issues like a more incremental release of water during run-off events precisely because SYRCL has earned the good will and respect of stakeholders over several years of being intimately involved with Yuba-related concerns.

“We have credibility in venues like relicensing because we are out there collecting science,” Reedy said.

“If you learn everything you can, talk to them about their projects, their hydrology, their models and show respect for the effort they are putting in and their bottom line, they become more willing to listen to your concerns and work through a collaborative process.”

SYRCL’s role as Yuba River advocate has evolved since its inception.

“Through the process of multiple campaigns we have learned the talk, we have learned the science and become respected partners at the table,” Dardick said. “We have come a long way from our foundation of being an activist group in someone’s living room to being the go-to nongovernmental organization for issues relating to the Yuba.”

Dardick talks about rolling up the sleeves and doing the hard technical work that respects the interests of recreationists, nature lovers, agriculturalists, farmers, water purveyors, miners, federal and state agencies, and hydroelectric managers.

“Agriculture and hydropower need to be accommodated and respected,” he said. “There are economic as well as environmental concerns, and that’s a maturity that reflects being a 30-year organization.”

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