

Study focuses on restoring Yuba River, with \$97M worth of proposals identified

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The South Fork Yuba River meanders through the South Yuba River State Park near the Buttermilk Bend trail last March. A recent ecosystem study on the ...

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Public comments about the Yuba River Ecosystem Restoration Feasibility Study and the environmental assessment will be accepted until Feb. 23.

Written comments may be submitted to: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Sacramento District, Attn: Planning Division, 1325 J Street, Sacramento, California 95814.

Comments can also be emailed to Yuba-River-Eco-Study@usace.army.mil. Emailed comments should include the commenter's mailing address, as well as "Yuba River Ecosystem Restoration Feasibility Study" in the subject line.

Hydraulic mining and development in the watershed contributed greatly to degradation in the lower Yuba River. A federal agency studied what could be done to restore that ecosystem and came up with nearly \$97 million worth of proposals.

Following a request by the Yuba County Water Agency, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers initiated the Yuba River Ecosystem Restoration Feasibility Study in 2015. The corps released its interim report and environmental assessment last week identifying current problems in the lower Yuba River, how they came about and alternatives for ecosystem restoration.

Curt Aikens, general manager of Yuba County Water Agency, said the agency helped fund the study and provided technical support with the goal of identifying specific steps to improve fish and wildlife habitat conditions in the river.

"A healthy Yuba River is essential for YCWA to fulfill our mission to the people of Yuba County, and that includes flood protection, water supplies, hydropower generation, recreation and fish and wildlife," Aikens said. "Our goal is that the final report will result in a project that improves habitat, especially for salmon and steelhead."

There will also be public meetings in Marysville and Sacramento to discuss the proposed project, answer questions and accept comments.

n Marysville Jan. 16 from 5 p.m.-7 p.m. at the Yuba County Government Center — 915 Eighth St. — in the Wheatland Conference Room.

n Sacramento Jan. 22 from 1 p.m.-3 p.m. at John E. Moss Federal Building Stanford Room — 650 Capitol Mall.

Melinda Booth

There will now be a 45-day window for public review, internal policy review and agency technical review. There will be opportunities for the public to ask questions and make comments at public meetings Jan. 16 in Marysville and Jan. 22 in Sacramento.

One environmental conservation group — the South Yuba River Citizens League — is reviewing the document and is planning on participating in that public process.

Executive Director Melinda Booth said SYRCL is highly involved in the lower Yuba River and has carried out several restoration projects over the past eight-plus years. Although conditions vary along the stretch of river, she said there has been a huge impact by legacy and hydraulic mining.

"There are things that need to be addressed to bring back the river to its natural state and to provide good habitat for salmon," Booth said.

Based on the current timeline, once public comment closes in February, Aikens said the next step will be for the Corps to endorse the recommended plan. Then the final report would be released for state and agency review, likely in spring of 2019, before it is submitted to Congress for possible authorization next year, Aikens said.

"This is really the first major step in a long process," Aikens said. "There are many steps and Congressional actions that would be required before this work would be authorized and funded."

“There are things that need to be addressed to bring back the river to its natural state and to provide good habitat for salmon.”

—SYRCL Executive Director

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PROPOSED PROJECT

The Corps compared different alternatives based on the cost and benefit of each action and eventually developed a project estimated to cost \$96.76 million that would restore about 178.6 acres of habitat along the lower Yuba River.

Nearly 43 acres of the project would focus on aquatic habitat — including side channels, backwater areas, bank scallops and channel stabilization. The report states that the actions would provide shallow, low velocity, rearing habitat and refuge for juvenile anadromous salmonids.

Engineered log jams, boulders and woody material will be placed in locations along the lower Yuba River where banks are actively eroding or sites with high velocities and shear stresses. The idea is that the objects will "promote bank stabilization, add structural complexity, provide velocity refuge for juvenile fish and modify local hydraulics and sediment transport," according to the interim report.

The rest of the project will focus on restoring about 136 acres of riparian habitat through floodplain lowering and grading, as well as by planting vegetation. One of the problems experienced on the lower river is that there are areas where existing vegetation is unable to thrive naturally due to substrate composition and the depth of the groundwater table.

Lowering the floodplain would essentially "reconnect the river to its floodplain and makes planting feasible where it was not previously due to excessive groundwater depths," according to the interim report. The restored riparian habitat would also function as an aquatic habitat during times of high water elevations in the Yuba River.

District commander Col. David Ray said after reviewing the report, the proposed project would not have any significant effects on environmental, social or cultural resources.

If authorized to be a federal project, the corps would pay about \$62.9 million and YCWA would pay an estimated \$33.9 million, based on October 2017 price levels. The corps also estimated that the annual operation and maintenance, repair, replacement and rehabilitation for the project will cost about \$1.5 million a year.

"We appreciate the restoration suggestions included in this draft report," Aikens said. "It's certainly a positive step in the right direction, but we would like to see additional steps included in the final report. We would like to partner with the corps to do even more, including fish passage improvements with a new step pool at Daguerre Point Dam, which would not only enhance the corps' current proposal but also have complementary public safety benefits."

BACKGROUND

The Yuba River provides water for communities and farmers, but it also harbors fish and wildlife resources that the country wants to conserve as part of the Endangered Species Act. The river is located along the Pacific Flyway, making it an important habitat for migratory birds. It also supports threatened fish species like Chinook salmon and steelhead.

The lower Yuba River has been designated as critical habitat.

According to the interim report, "hydraulic mining washed away entire sections of the upper Yuba River watershed. The release of hundreds of millions of cubic yards of mining debris filled river channels, caused flooding of cities and farms and obstructed navigation on the Sacramento River."

Two dams were constructed in the 20th century to impound the mining debris and are still present today — Daguerre Point Dam and Englebright Dam. However, the brunt of the damage had been done.

The sediment dislodged by the mining practices settled where the grade of the river flattened. Now, many sections of the lower Yuba River are covered under millions of cubic yards of cobble and large gravel – which make it difficult for riparian vegetation to thrive.

The report also states that development in the watershed — debris dams and additional water supply, flood control and hydropower dams — have further altered the river.

Jake Abbott writes for the Marysville Appeal Democrat. He can be reached at jabbott@appealdemocrat.com.