

Water Spotlight: Restoring and Managing California's Watersheds

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Summary:

The landscapes of a watershed vary according to size, topography, climate, and human activities. Healthy watersheds sustain healthy aquatic and terrestrial environments by filtering pollutants, directing the movement of water, nutrients, and sediment, and providing water to sustain life.

Read the full article below:

Providing enough water for the many ways water is needed and used in California is a continuing challenge. And we League members can help to meet that challenge by promoting the best recent science-based, water management with an emphasis on water as a public trust.

Watershed management focuses on water supply, groundwater, flood protection, habitat restoration, and wildfire resilience. That's a lot. So, let's consider what watersheds are and what they do: Watersheds are the mountain meadows where snow collects, they are our city streets, rooftops and gardens where rain falls. They are the land areas that feed ponds and lakes and create a hydrologic web of tiny creeks and streams forming the rivers that head to the sea. The landscapes of a watershed vary according to size, topography, climate, and human activities. Healthy watersheds sustain healthy aquatic and terrestrial environments by filtering pollutants, directing the movement of water, nutrients, and sediment, and providing water to sustain life.

One example, the Klamath River watershed, stretches across southern Oregon and northern California and covers approximately 9.4 million acres or 15,688 square miles: it's about the size of Maryland. Such large watersheds are referred to as river basins that encompass many smaller watersheds. However, a mismanaged watershed suffering years of degradation may become unhealthy.

The following example is my personal experience. My husband and I heard reports of dead fish in the Klamath River that week in September 2002; however, we had planned a fishing trip along with a friend. The day was beautiful, sunny and cool, perfect for fishing. But what a horrific trip it turned into! When we launched the boat, we could see hundreds of dead salmon

floating in the river. Once we were underway, I began breathing in the exhaust fumes from the outboard motor to keep from gagging on the stench of rotting fish.

My husband and our friend, in their disbelief, made weak jokes about all the fish anybody could want. I wept. We continued up the Klamath and continued to see dead salmon everywhere. Those that were still alive swam so slowly they seemed more like goldfish. They were obviously sick, soon to die like the others. In the river and along both banks, the dead salmon floated and washed up by the thousands. What would have been a good salmon run became a scene of death and devastation such as I have never seen before or since.(1)

The low estimate is that about 34,000 adult chinook salmon were killed that year when returning to the river to spawn, making it the largest salmon kill in the history of the Western United States. Some say the count could have been as high as 65,000. The fish kill has been attributed to low flow rates and volume from increased diversions and dams, higher water temperatures because of dams and the resulting infections.

In 2024, twenty-two years after the massive fish kill, four Klamath dams, considered major contributors to the watershed degradation and fish kill, were torn down. The continuous effort of local tribes, environmental groups, fishing organizations, and river-restoration advocates eventually convinced enough people, including the owners of the dams, that the dams should be removed. In fact, in February 2019, the LWVC and the LWV of Humboldt County (LWVHC) sent a letter to the State Water Resources Control Board supporting the Draft Environmental Impact Report (EIR) that called for the removal of the dams. This advocacy was based on both LWVC's and LWVHC's positions on Natural Resources. Objections to removing the dams such as lower property values, loss of tax revenue, and curtailed irrigation plus doubts about fish recovery, sediment impacts, the size of the undertaking, and the time it might take for the river to recover, were finally overcome.

Following removal of the dams, more than 420 miles of river and streams in the watershed were once again accessible to migrating fish. Salmon returned once again to their historic spawning grounds in the watershed's upper reaches. On May 6, 2026, speaking about the first salmon fishing season on the Klamath River in three years, California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) Director Meghan Hertel said: "It is a moment of genuine celebration for everyone invested in the health of our watersheds."

The river basin's recovery continues as the Yurok Tribe and partners plant billions of native seeds and plants along the riverbanks and on the nutrient-rich silt of former reservoir beds. These riparian plantings are essential for healthy watersheds to reduce bank erosion, filter sediment and toxins, allow for groundwater recharge, and moderate water flow which helps to prevent flooding. The slowing and capture of surface water runoff also allows for groundwater recharge. As a human, you live in a watershed. As a League member, you can help protect and restore watersheds no matter where you live in California. Listed below are

some suggestions on how to do that:

The Department of Water Resources is beginning the two-year development of the "California Water Plan Update 2028." Its mandate is to ensure California's process ... "reflects the diverse needs of communities across the state's 130 watersheds; public participation is critical and highly encouraged." Sign up to receive information about the process and learn how you can help shape California's water future at

<https://water.ca.gov/programs/california-water-plan>

See also <https://water.ca.gov/-/media/DWR-Website/Web-Pages/Programs/California-Water-Plan/Docs/Update2028/CWP-2028-Fact-Sheet.pdf>

Learn more about watersheds. For a thorough explanation of watersheds and ways to help protect them see the Power Point at this link:

<https://www.conservation.ca.gov/dlrp/Educational%20Documents/California%20Watersheds.pdf>

In addition, you may be interested in a webinar about the Santa Ana River that supplies water for millions of people in urban Southern California.

<https://youtu.be/JA1iS2UtyDY>

Learn where your water comes from before it reaches you and where it goes after you've used it. The following link shows watersheds by zip code:

<https://www.epa.gov/waterdata/how-my-waterway>

Read your local League's and LWVC's positions on Natural Resources.

Locate a body of water near you and use the League positions to support advocacy for your watershed. By protecting any creek, river, stream, lake, pond, or even a vernal pool near your home, you'll be protecting some part of your local watershed.

Learn more about conservation groups doing work in your area: join them and/or support them.

(1) Links to several studies about the causes of the 2002 Klamath Fish Kill:

www.waterboards.ca.gov/waterrights/water_issues/programs/bay_delta/california_waterfix/exhibits/docs/PCFFA&IGFR/part2/pcffa_155.pdf

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2002_Klamath_River_fish_kill