

Water management requires regional collaboration

In this year, when drought impacts grip the majority of California, identifying solutions to our water challenges is more imperative than ever.

The water challenges we face affect us on many levels, from the water that comes out of our tap, to the water that irrigates the food we eat, and that which filters back into the ground to restore underground aquifers. Managing this important resource is complicated and is marked by a contentious history.

In a shift toward collaborative, cross-jurisdictional and multiple-benefit water management, Integrated Regional Water Management refines the process for managing water challenges and opportunities. IRWM works off the premise that outcomes are more sustainable when a diversity of viewpoints agree on solutions; when multiple benefits are maximized; and when planning efforts transcend federal, state, county, and local jurisdictions. At a time when economic and human capacities are stretched thin, collaboration expands a region's collective resources to effect meaningful change.

The Southern Sierra Regional Water Management Group formed in 2008 to do just that. The RWMG is a voluntary collaboration of non-profit organizations, agencies, local water/flood/conservation districts and landowners recognized by the California Department of Water Resources as the IRWM group for the Southern Sierra Region. For the past six years, the group has convened public meetings



Chris Moi

Bobby Kamansky

to plan and implement creative water-management solutions that enhance the natural resources and human communities in the expansive region.

The Southern Sierra Region, one of the more severely drought-impacted areas of California, is critically important to all southern San Joaquin Valley residents, and beyond. The region includes many of California's most precious natural resources: Sequoia and Kings National Parks; Sequoia, Sierra and Inyo National Forests; Devils Post Pile National Monument; and the upper watersheds of the San Joaquin, Kings, Kaweah, Tule, Deer, White and Kern rivers, in addition to several smaller watersheds. The boundaries of the Southern Sierra Region include the foothill and Sierra Nevada portions of Madera, Fresno and Tulare Counties as well as Native American tribal lands.

Water is the largest export of the region. The Sierra Nevada's snowy peaks form the headwaters of several major rivers, which pass through storage facilities to supply clean water to Valley cities, farms, ecosystems and underground aquifers. Those headwaters irrigate millions of acres of the nation's top-producing farmland and support

more than two million seasonal visitors from around the world, which also supports the local economy.

Careful, collaborative management of this special region is critical.

To that end, the RWMG recently released its Southern Sierra Integrated Regional Water Management Plan, a voluntary, non-regulatory planning document that identifies consensus-based water resource projects and programs for the 6,200 square-mile region. The plan is available on the RWMG website for review and public comment. Public comments will be accepted through Oct. 26.

The SSRWM Plan is an important planning document; moreover, it is a tool to attract state and federal funding to this large, rugged, and sparsely-populated region, which has struggled to compete for project funding. Once the plan is approved, the RWMG will focus on bringing in resources to implement the plan and its multiple-benefit projects aimed at improving conditions for the watershed, both upstream and downstream.

Examples of multiple-benefit projects and programs include those that improve water quality, provide better flood management, restore and enhance ecosystems, and create more reliable water supplies. Such multiple-benefit projects are our best shot at managing California's erratic precipitation patterns in the face of increasing water demands and a changing climate.

Even when the state is not gripped in drought, we are



Snow on the Sierra Nevada.

TERESA DOUGLAS

between potentially devastating dry spells and should plan accordingly. Or we are flooded by storm water that overwhelms our natural and human infrastructure.

In this time of drought, we should remind ourselves that we are all stakeholders in the integrated management of our most precious and limited resource, water. Successful, sustainable water management requires collaborative, regional, and resourceful multiple-benefit project planning and implementation, which also depends largely on an informed, voting citizenry.

INFORMATION

Learn more about the Southern Sierra RWMG and its IRWMP at www.southernsierrarwm.org.

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Chris Moi is Land Transaction Director for the Sequoia Riverlands Trust, and Bobby Kamansky is Principal Biologist with Kamansky's Ecological Consulting.