

THE Current



MID's Monthly Newsletter

September 2012



FROM THE HEADGATE: MID GENERAL MANAGER JOHN SWEIGARD

MID Takes Lead Preserving Environment and Protecting Your Valuable Resources

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Merced Irrigation District is entrusted with managing significant resources for its constituents in eastern Merced County. We are responsible for protecting critical water rights and delivering reliable energy to local residences and businesses. Doing so comes with a host of unique environmental and regulatory challenges. MID remains committed to protecting your resources by meeting these challenges head on and doing our part to meet the clean energy demands of the future. What's at stake is nothing short of "Our Way of Life."

Protecting and Enhancing Merced River Environment

MID has a long history of working collaboratively to tackle environmental challenges. Of most relevance to MID's water operations is the support of Fall Run Chinook Salmon populations in the Merced River. For years the District has assisted the federal and state wildlife agencies which manage this anadromous fish dependent on the Merced River. Anadromous fish are those living their life in both fresh and saltwater.

In recent years, several native anadromous fish species have been listed as threatened or endangered through the Endangered Species Act. Such a listing can have significant water supply impacts, as has been seen with the ongoing battles associated with the state and federal water contractors, the Delta pumping facilities and the Friant Water Authority. Fortunately, the Salmon on the Merced River have not been listed. For both MID's growers and the fish alike, it is in the District's best interests



A Department of Fish and Game Biologist, above, shows small Salmon to MID Deputy General Manager Hicham EITal.



At left, salmon are tagged and prepared for their trip down the Merced River.

that our operations are managed to facilitate a healthy environment for these fish and avoid the need for special protections. In most simple terms, an existing species in the Merced River being listed as threatened or endangered has the potential to cause significant restrictions on MID operations and impact our water supply to growers.

To that end, the District has remained an environmental leader working progressively with the state and federal regulatory agencies. MID, in concert with its partners in the San Joaquin River Group, just completed a 15-year study advancing the science and knowledge related to Salmon which are dependent on the Merced River and other tributary

See "The Headgate" See Back Page

Continued From Front: “The Headgate”

ies to the San Joaquin River. Known as the Vernalis Adaptive Management Program (VAMP), the program included selling water to the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and releasing that water to the Merced River at different times and at varying rates. These water releases helped facilitate scientific studies leading to a better understanding of the various challenges of each life stage of the Salmon.

The VAMP studies ultimately illustrated that numerous stressors impact the health of Salmon populations. Primary among those stressors are predation by other species, such as striped bass. Other studies also have shown that ocean conditions and commercial fishing regulations have a primary influence on Salmon populations. The VAMP studies helped establish the now-accepted understanding that predation and other stressors must be addressed – that simply providing more water does not increase fish populations.

The Future of the Merced River

MID is currently undergoing federal relicensing of its hydroelectric operations with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, commonly known as “FERC.” MID has formalized a partnership between the District and the California Department of Fish and Game to perform numerous, specific studies intended to identify the needs of Salmon throughout their life cycle. The partnership aims to jointly determine what, if any, impacts MID’s hydroelectric project has on these needs. The partnership’s goal is to cooperatively develop resource management measures that can be submitted to FERC. The measures will be considered by FERC in determining what mitigation measures may be required under the new license.

From the Nest to the River

In addition to the numerous studies on the Merced River, MID has been a leader in supporting the Merced River Salmon Hatchery. Located on MID land near Snelling, it is the only Salmon hatchery in the San Joaquin River basin. It is operated by the state Department of Fish and Game. MID funded the initial construction of the hatchery in association with the construction of the Merced River Hydroelectric Project and has remained a close partner with the Department of Fish and Game.

Funded by MID for more than 14 years, the Department of Fish and Game operates an aggressive tagging program at the hatchery. In fact, a recent report has just been issued recommending all hatcheries in California follow a similar protocol. Each fall, Salmon swimming upstream in the Merced River are captured and their eggs are harvested and fertilized. The eggs are hatched and the Salmonids are raised by the Department of Fish and Game until they become large enough to release into the wild. Prior to their release, each of the Salmon is inserted with a microscopic tag. This in turn allows scientists to track the Salmon on their out-migration through the Merced

River, down the San Joaquin River, through the Delta and out to the Pacific Ocean. The tagging also tracks the Salmon’s return back to the Merced River to spawn – which effectively ends their natural life cycle. This tracking data helps to better manage the fishery and provides data about the number of Salmon that complete their return back up the Merced River.

Green before Green

Long before the phrase “going green” existed, MID was already going green. The District first built a hydroelectric project in the 1920s on the original Exchequer Dam. It was capable of producing up to 31 megawatts of emission-free renewable electricity, enough to power 7,500 homes. The current hydroelectric operations of MID have the capacity to produce up to 105 megawatts of renewable and emission-free electricity. That’s enough electricity to power approximately 22,000 homes.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of MID’s hydroelectricity is not recognized as renewable clean energy under a new mandate authored by Senator Joe Simitian, of Palo Alto. Merced’s local Senator, Anthony Cannella, has continued to support efforts by

MID and other utilities to have hydroelectricity recognized as clean, renewable energy.

MID’s Future Energy

It is almost unfathomable that MID will spend tens of millions of dollars and face costly new mitigation measures to obtain its federal operating license – yet this hydroelectric energy source will still fall outside California’s definitions of renewable energy. As a result, as with all California utilities, MID will likely be required to purchase or construct additional energy sources, such as wind and solar in the coming years. The costs will be unfairly passed on to Merced residents and businesses. Nevertheless, MID is

strongly committed to its responsibility to follow the direction and uphold the mandates set by the California legislature. The District already purchases wind power and receives credit for its small hydroelectric generator on Lake McSwain.

As we continue to advocate the needs for acceptance of the New Exchequer hydro-project as a source of renewable energy, we are optimistic that wind and solar energy will eventually become more affordable. To that end, we have continued to work closely and to financially support the UC Solar Institute at UC Merced. Among the Institute’s goals is reducing the cost of solar energy to utilities such as MID. We remain optimistic that this investment will pay off in future dividends to MID’s ratepayers and others who face economic challenges in meeting California’s new clean energy purchasing mandates.

Final Thoughts

The regulatory challenges MID faces on a daily bases are often burdensome. More often than not they are overreaching. However, as we’ve said time and time again, we are committed to doing our part. We believe MID must shoulder a share of the responsibility in protecting the environment and passing on a sustainable way of life for our current, and future, water and energy users. Simply put, it’s the right thing to do.



Traps used by biologists are installed along the Merced River to catch and study Salmon populations.