

San Joaquin River Restoration Program

The San Joaquin River Restoration Program (SJRRP) has two primary goals. First to restore and maintain fish populations in good condition, including naturally reproducing and self-sustaining populations of salmon and other native fish. The other goal is to reduce or avoid adverse water supply impacts to long-term water contractors in the area. An important part of the restoration effort is the intended reestablishment of spring- and fall-run Chinook salmon populations. Spring-run Chinook salmon are currently listed as threatened under the state and federal Endangered Species Acts. Restoring the river to a conducive habitat for these important fish species will help renew their populations, hopefully to sustainable levels that also allow for the delisting of spring-run Chinook.

There are several challenges the SJRRP efforts must overcome. Water temperatures in the area historically have been detrimental to salmon populations, significant habitat alterations have occurred over the years, and physical barriers to both upstream and downstream fish passage are present. A depleted game warden force is charged with investigations and prosecutions of illegal habitat destruction, water diversions and poaching in the project area. Overcoming these obstacles and accomplishing the successful restoration of the San Joaquin River will improve both fisheries and their habitat – an important conservation achievement as well as a boost for the commercial fishing industry, which has been devastated by the low numbers of salmon reaching ocean waters. It also is believed the SJRRP efforts will improve water quality in the San Joaquin River, and provide increased recreational opportunities and economic benefits.

Not everyone is in agreement with the SJRRP. Local water districts, agribusiness interests and some local governments believe restoring salmon (especially the spring-run Chinook) is unrealistic and can harm the San Joaquin Valley's critical agricultural industry. Additionally, settlement agreement stipulations from related litigation include a severely compressed timeline, the requirement to reintroduce fish prior to completion of channel improvements and the reintroduction of spring-run Chinook without addressing potential adverse effects.

The Department of Fish and Game (DFG) is a partner in the restoration effort and has the responsibility to ensure the protection of the state's natural resources. DFG is implementing site-specific and projectwide monitoring of habitat needs and water temperature and is conducting a statewide salmonid genetics study, the data from which will be used to design reintroduction strategies that minimize impacts to spring-run stocks. Adding a conservation and research facility to the state's existing San Joaquin Fish Hatchery, and a new law to facilitate incidental take associated with the restoration effort will be beneficial to the SJRRP and DFG's development of remedies for the potential loss of sportfish recreation that may occur from restoration activities.