

The River Advocate

Friends of the River

The voice of California's Rivers
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In this Issue

- 2023 Priorities and Looking Forward
- Currents: Victories and Threats
 - Wild and Scenic river proposals in congress
 - Flooding - a Sacramento Valley perspective
 - Flooding - a wider perspective
 - Cosumnes river makes national news
 - Reflections on living in a flat place
- Remembering Bill Jennings
- Wild and Scenic River Anniversaries - January

Reflections and Directions for 2023: Priorities and Looking Forward

Jann Dorman, Executive Director

The last few weeks have brought much needed rain and snow to California. Along with the drama and destruction, there have been numerous articles in the press about the amount of river water running out to the sea, and what should be done about it. My personal clipping service (my cognitively hyperactive, 97 year-old Jewish mother) has been providing me with regular updates on the subject. As I was reading a conservative blog this week, I came across this belief; it's easy to store water, just dig a bigger hole and build higher walls. We may laugh (and cry) for the stupidity, destruction and injustice implied, but this belief captures a widely held view. Public awareness of the existential question of our time might be at an all-time high; How do we solve for flood and drought at the same time, with the same water? Public awareness of the answers remains very low. This existential question is at the core of what FOR works to accomplish, a California water future that is just and equitable, meets our urgent needs for adapting to climate change, actually works as planned, and most importantly is sustainable and resilient. Learn about FOR's 2023 priorities [here](#).



Jann Dorman, Executive Director

Currents: Victories & Threats

Ron Stork, Senior Policy Advocate

Wild & Scenic River proposals wrap-up

Last month I speculated that the California wild & scenic river designation package and the Oregon Smith River National Recreation Area addition / wild & scenic river designation would fail to achieve final passage in this past Congress (117th), just as they had failed in the preceding Congress (116th) (and briefly introduced and died in the Congress before that (115th)).

The 117th Congress is no more. These important bills to Oregon and California lawmakers failed to find a must-pass omnibus bill in which they could be included, and they were not passed as stand-alone bills. So once again, river advocates will be starting over, but this time in the 118th Congress and on the turbulent and potentially hostile waters of the House of Representatives under its new Speaker of the House, Representative Kevin McCarthy (R-Bakersfield). Read more [here](#).



The National Capital. Image courtesy of Ron Stork, Senior Policy Advocate.



Flooded streets in "Old Sacramento" during the Great California Flood of 1861-1862. It is important to remember that California's floodwater management has improved dramatically since 1862. Photo courtesy of the California State Library.

Winter and the rains return — a Sacramento Valley perspective

It's certainly been a wet winter so far, almost wearying. If this trend stays for the next few months, it may be another 1982-83 winter, a year of generous rainfall and runoff, but not huge rainfloods. Nevertheless, that was a year where we looked forward to the end of California's rainy season and appreciated the words of the Song of Solomon, "for behold, the winter is past; the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth, the time of singing has come" (ESV). Yes, 1983 was a great wildflower year — and not too bad for river critters either. Maybe 2023 will be as well.

This winter, predictably, has also been a time where the grumpy among us speak of hoarding nature's bounty behind new concrete dams (CA has 1,200+ already existing dams). These grumps speak of megastorms with massive floods and dredge up dark memories of the storied California 1862 flood. Read about how current flood protection infrastructure can handle the 1862 flood [here](#).

Winter and the rains return — a wider perspective on the 1862 flood

The expected flood future of other parts of California may not be so sanguine.

A little to the south of the Sacramento Valley, the warmer and juicier rains of the future will fall on the typically snow-clad high-elevation Sierran mountains east of the San Joaquin Valley. Today's dramatically reduced river corridors of the San Joaquin Valley mean that the giant dams there may be unable to maintain their flood space reservations in the face of weeks and months of high inflows like those experienced in 1862. This is because there is not enough room for the river, downstream of the dams, to safely move high flows. Read more [here](#).



Floodwaters ravage a community near the San Joaquin River in Manteca, California (January 1997). Photo courtesy of Department of Water Resources.

The Cosumnes River in the national news

The Cosumnes River in south Sacramento County originates in mid-elevations in the Sierra Nevada, between the South Fork of the American River and the Mokelumne River. Unlike any other Sierran River, it flows essentially undammed into the San Francisco Bay-Delta.

It also floods. Big time.

This watershed has flooded up this year dramatically enough to make the national news (the east-coast national press always enjoys a good west-coast disaster story).

Here, the levees are “sugar” levees, levees so close to the river that they have no hope of surviving the high water that arises from time to time in the Cosumnes. Read more [here](#).



The Cosumnes River overlooking the town of Wilton and the Sierra Nevada mountains. See localized flooding in Wilton (January 12, 2023). Photo courtesy of GH.

Reflections on living on a flat place

I haven't always lived on a flat place. I grew up on an alluvial fan of the San Gabriel Mountains in Southern California.

The evidence of high-velocity water transport was everywhere: the sands of the garden were full of rounded river rocks, the older houses in town had foundations of large rounded field stones, and the major north-south streets were designed to convey the occasional torrents coming off the mountains (and to terrify small children walking to school who could be swept away as they tried to cross those streets).

When I moved to the Central Valley, I settled in Merced. The ground in and around it was flat, good bicycling country. The land was also cut with a few leveed streams that received water from the foothills and toe-hills of the Sierra Nevada to the east. Read more about my time in Merced and the flood vulnerability of communities in the San Joaquin Valley [here](#).



My former home in Merced. Photo taken in 2010.

Remembering Bill Jennings, a Delta hero

Keiko Mertz



Bill Jennings, photo courtesy of Chris Shutes.

This December, the California water world abruptly lost Bill Jennings, esteemed activist for the Delta, California rivers, and their inhabitants. Bill dedicated more than half of his life to fighting for healthy ecosystems and just water management.

Originally from Kentucky, in his younger years Bill developed passions for civil causes, tobacco, and fly fishing. Following a massive fish kill on the Mokelumne, Bill also developed an insatiable appetite for using his voice and cleverness to protect the environment. It was during the Mokelumne era that FOR became acquainted with Bill, crossing paths with him frequently. Bill's work on saving the Mokelumne was critical to the efforts. Read more about Bill [here](#).



Wild and Scenic River Anniversaries

Ron Stork, Senior Policy Advocate

January 20, 1981: In the last River Advocate “Wild & Scenic River Anniversaries” section, I told some of the tales surrounding the creation of the California Wild & Scenic Rivers Act some 50 years ago. The California system protected segments of the American River, and the Smith, Klamath, Trinity, and Eel Rivers and many of their major tributaries.



Of course, while lovers of the state’s rivers celebrated the system’s creation in 1972, the state’s water industry continued to plan for the next link to access all these north state rivers — the Peripheral Canal, which would transport water around the San Joaquin and Sacramento River Delta. And while the water agencies and their beneficiaries worked to advance such concrete projects, the river community was deeply committed to preserving and protecting the California wild & scenic river system.

Click [here](#) to learn more about the Peripheral Canal drama (1980s), and the riveting story about how some of California's rivers were added to the federal wild and scenic river system *just in the nick of time*.

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