

A Better Path to Salmon Recovery in California

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For the first time in 100 years, spring-run Chinook salmon could return to their historical spawning habitat in the Sierra Nevada's North Yuba River under a framework agreement recently announced by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, National Marine Fisheries Service, Yuba County Water Agency, American Rivers, Trout Unlimited and the California Sportfishing Protection Alliance. If the Yuba Salmon Partnership Initiative agreement is concluded, it would create the first-ever "collect-and-transport" program for salmon in California, like those used at numerous dams in Oregon and Washington, some for decades. We believe it presents the best near-term option to reunite salmon with their habitat above rim dams in the Sierra Nevada Mountain range, where dams block salmon in every major river.

All of us are committed to salmon recovery. After years of collaborative study, however, we have learned that the choice is not simply whether to remove the Corps of Engineers Englebright Dam, as suggested by Yvon Chouinard and Matt Stoecker ("The wrong way to save salmon on the Yuba," July 23rd). A better choice is to reconnect salmon to 30 miles of prime North Yuba River habitat in the near future rather than do nothing for years or even decades while attempts are made to address the environmental, financial, and public health and safety challenges of removing this one dam. The Yuba Salmon Partnership Initiative also plans to improve habitat in the 24 miles of the Lower Yuba River, below Englebright Dam.

Englebright Dam, constructed in 1941 to contain mining debris, is a "rim dam," (the large dams in the Sierra Nevada foothills that block historical salmon habitat) like Folsom on the American River, Shasta on the Sacramento River, and Oroville on the Feather River. At 260 feet high, Englebright is too tall for conventional fish ladders, and prevents salmon and steelhead from reaching habitat in the upper watershed. The dam holds 28 million cubic yards of debris, some of it contaminated with arsenic, mercury and other toxics. That material would have to be removed prior to breaching the dam or it would pose a potentially serious risk to public health and safety to downstream communities. A recent study commissioned by the collaborative Yuba Salmon Forum estimated the complete removal of the dam and the sediment could be as much as \$3 billion. This is 15 times larger than the Corps of Engineers annual flood control construction budget in California.

Breaching Englebright Dam would also not allow salmon and steelhead access to the North Yuba River, the known historic and best upstream habitat in this watershed. Other rivers and streams above Englebright do not have comparable holding pools and cold water that salmon and steelhead need to survive. Even if Englebright were removed, a collect-and-transport program would have to be implemented to move the fish past Yuba County Water Agency's 645 foot high New Bullards Bar Dam and Reservoir to get them to the North Yuba.

The Yuba Salmon Partnership Initiative would also accomplish a goal of Governor Brown's California Water Action Plan - establishing fish passage around rim dams. The Water Action Plan states, "...passage around the rim dams may be necessary to recover salmon and steelhead, because 95 percent of the historical habitat for these fish is above the dams."

We agree that transporting fish around dams in trucks is not ideal. State and federal fish agencies will need a strategy for bringing salmon back in each watershed that fits the facts. Sometimes dam removal will be the best choice. Other times not. We believe this project could demonstrate that collect-and-transport programs can contribute to the recovery of Central Valley salmon populations, as they have for salmon on many rivers in the Pacific Northwest.

As we work to recover California's salmon and steelhead runs, we must make progress wherever and however we reasonably can. We choose to act now. Our partnership is committed to a transparent, science-based process that depends on public input in developing the specifics of the proposed program. For the sake of our iconic salmon, we invite advocates of removing Englebright Dam such as Messrs. Chouinard and Stoecker, and other stakeholders, to work with us to ensure that the Yuba Salmon Partnership Initiative is successful, until such time as other strategies become viable. We know they and others share our goal of bringing salmon home to the Sierras. To learn more about our work, please visit www.dfg.ca.gov/fish/Resources/Chinook/YSPI/.

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