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Scott River Water Trust seeks to help fish, farmers

Program leases water rights from growers

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The Scott River is a spawning ground for important fish such as the coho salmon and fall chinook salmon. The Scott River Water Trust is working to create water lease agreements with local farmers and ranchers in order to keep more water in the river during critical periods in the spring and summer when those fish spawn. - Photo courtesy of Danielle Quigley

ETNA - In Northern California a unique effort is under way - possibly the first of its kind in California - that seeks to enhance fish migration by keeping more water in local streambeds.

The Scott River Water Trust is a developing program that leases and/or purchases water historically used for agriculture and pays willing water right holders to leave the water in the stream for threatened coho salmon.

The idea behind the water trust was first discussed a decade ago, said project consultant Sari Sommarstrom. Then the coho salmon, which spawns and rears in the river, was listed as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act. Finally funded in 2002, the water trust program is a project of the Scott River Watershed Council and the Siskiyou Resource Conservation District, with the California Department of Fish and Game initially funding the effort.

The Scott River is one of the Klamath River's four major tributaries. The river runs through Siskiyou County's Scott Valley, a largely agricultural area.

Sommarstrom said the water trust's goal is to improve streamflow for salmon and steelhead at critical periods within the Scott River watershed. The trust proposes to do that through compensating willing water-right holders - in particular, farmers and ranchers who use the water for irrigation and stock watering - to forego using some of their water.

"It's a community idea that developed due to a combination of proactive nature and upcoming regulatory requirements," said Gary Black, a SRCD senior project coordinator who has been instrumental in putting the water trust together.

The flows of the Scott River and its tributaries are snowmelt-driven. In the spring, Black noted, "there's more than enough water for fish and farms," but as the snowmelt tails off, supplies become tough in the late summer and fall. "The issue of late summer competition between fish and ag is pretty significant," he said.

Water needs for the fish are most critical in late July, August and September, Sommarstrom said, when fish species such as coho salmon and steelhead are rearing their young in the streams. In years when fall rains are delayed, she said, even the fall chinook salmon have not had enough water for spawning in October.

Black said the water trust wants to focus on short-term water leases with water users to improve fall and summer flows. The typical lease, he said, would be 60 to 90 days in duration during those times.

Sommarstrom said if a water user agreed to divert less stream water for irrigation, the water trust would fully compensate him for production loss. Likewise, the trust would help ranchers get alternative sources of water for watering livestock during the post-irrigation season.

Determining water value is important, Sommarstrom said. "We don't want to pay too much or too little for water, just what is fair and reasonable."

Just how much water do the fish need? She suggested the amount could range from as little as 0.5 cubic feet per second (CFS) and up. "That can make a big difference in a small creek that's only flowing a half CFS already," she said.

Sommarstrom emphasized that the water trust seeks to benefit the fish without hurting other water users - the farmers and ranchers who are irrigating their crops of pasture and alfalfa, and watering their livestock.

"We don't want to take land out of production permanently. I know that's been an issue in some other states," she said.

Black, who is also a rancher in the area, agreed.

"Agriculture is the main economy in this valley and is the only answer to protect existing open space from development. The intent of the RCD is to find local solutions that demonstrate agriculture can and will be the best economy for the environment and community. The water trust is an extension of that belief."

Even though it's a community-based effort, Black called the response from both the ag and environmental communities "mixed." While some environmentalists don't feel it goes far enough, some water users are concerned about the risk associated with having less water available.

Black said many people think the effort's intent is to increase water flows into the Klamath River. "That is entirely not the intent and is not possible," he said.

The trust's water transactions will have "minimal to no influence" on the Klamath, he said, and its goals include addressing fishery and water quality issues within the Scott River watershed only.

Water trusts are a new concept in California, said Sommarstrom. "When we are formalized, we will be the first water trust in California, as far as I know."

The concept has already been adopted in Oregon, Washington state, Colorado and Montana, she said.

A critical step in transferring water to instream uses, for the short- or long-term, is state approval, a process that both Black and Sommarstrom report has been very slow.

Sommarstrom and Black said that there are already a few instream transactions before the State's Water Resources Control Board's Division of Water Rights, which hasn't approved them yet. One of the transactions has been waiting for approval for 16 months, said Black.

Part of the issue, Sommarstrom said, may be that the instream water transfer concept is so new to the state that officials don't know how to handle it and staffing is limited.

"This process is regulatorily strangled," Black said. "The community is proactively trying to do the right thing for fish and water quality and the process won't allow us do what agencies and interest groups continually ask of us."

Going forward, Sommarstrom said, building relationships will be key to the effort. They're calling this a water trust with a capital T, she said, but what will be essential is to establish trust - with a small t - within the Scott River watershed community.

