

**COUNTY OF PLACER**  
**Community Development/Resource Agency**

Michael J. Johnson, AICP  
Agency Director

**PLANNING**  
**SERVICES DIVISION**

Paul Thompson, Deputy Director

**MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** Honorable Board of Supervisors  
**FROM:** Michael J. Johnson, AICP  
Agency Director  
**DATE:** January 8, 2013  
**SUBJECT: STATUS UPDATE – CHINOOK SALMON IN THE AUBURN RAVINE WATERSHED**

**ACTION REQUESTED**

Update on the status of Chinook salmon and Steelhead in Auburn Ravine. No Board action is requested.

**BACKGROUND**

Historically, both fall-run Chinook salmon and Central Valley Steelhead (generally known as salmonids) have been an important component of the aquatic ecosystem of western Placer County. The Bear and American Rivers have had historic runs that have been truncated by dam construction in the past century. Salmonids continue to be found in the Bear River below Camp Far West Dam in Placer County. Today, there are no salmonids in the American River watershed in Placer County. The history of salmonid runs in Dry Creek, Auburn Ravine, and Coon Creek watersheds are not as well documented. There are anecdotal accounts, particularly for the Auburn Ravine, of fish runs in the late 1930's near the Wise Powerhouse. On Doty Ravine, a major tributary to Coon Creek, Supervisor Weygandt can recall seeing significant runs of Chinook salmon every fall and on a couple of occasions large Steelhead in the summertime in his youth (1961 through 1968).

Salmonids associated with West Placer streams have benefitted from the conveyance of irrigation water through canals and the streams themselves. Much of this water was originally introduced into these streams during the "gold rush" mining era of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Irrigation water combined with treated wastewater and runoff from urban irrigation practices has resulted in perennial streams being present where historically they were likely intermittent. These perennial flows can now be found even in the upper portions of the watershed.

Since 2002, one of Placer Legacy's top priorities has been the modification of structures that inhibit and/or limit anadromous (salmon/steelhead) fish passage in the Auburn Ravine, Coon Creek, and Dry Creek watersheds. In particular, with project partners, the County has focused its efforts on two concrete structures within the Auburn Ravine watershed – the Nevada Irrigation District Gaging Station off Highway 65 in the City of Lincoln, and the Nevada Irrigation District Hemphill Dam in Placer County, both of which were identified in the Auburn Ravine/Coon Creek Ecosystem Restoration Plan as priority projects. The decision to modify the Nevada Irrigation District (NID) Hemphill Dam and Gaging Station sites was driven by a collaborative process that embraced the concept that returning Chinook salmon to Auburn Ravine was possible. This was achieved through common agreement by all watershed

stakeholders including NID and the City of Lincoln. For both barriers, it was determined that structural modifications could be made that would allow for both upstream and downstream fish passage. Auburn Ravine above these two structures provides important spawning and rearing habitat that the Department of Fish and Game has estimated could support as many as 10,000 salmonids for each linear mile of stream.

With the successful modification of the NID Gaging Station, nearly 300 Chinook salmon ascended the structure in November and December of 2012. The County's efforts will now be directed at restoring fish passage at the Hemphill Dam in Placer County. The County's project partners include: California Department of Water Resources; Nevada Irrigation District; City of Lincoln; Dry Creek Conservancy; Save Auburn Ravine Salmon and Steelhead; American Basin Council of Watersheds; California Department of Fish & Game; the Bella Vista Foundation; and the Granite Bay Flycasters. Previously received grant funds have provided an evaluation of various alternatives for the Hemphill Dam and the project is likely to be a highly competitive project due to the success that was achieved at the Gaging Station and the value of the habitat upstream from Hemphill Dam.

In addition to the direct involvement by Placer County via the Placer Legacy program, there have been other successes in the past couple of years related to salmonids in western Placer County.

- Chinook salmon found at the Hidden Falls Park on new gravels placed as part of the construction of a new bridge over Coon Creek.
- Removal of the Cottonwood Dam and restoration of Miners Ravine in Granite Bay.
- The formation of the Save Auburn Ravine Salmon and Steelhead (SARSAS) as an advocacy organization for improving habitat conditions in Auburn Ravine for salmon and steelhead.
- The activities of the American Basin Council of Watersheds particularly as it relates to stream monitoring and public outreach/education.
- Various habitat restoration efforts on Auburn Ravine, Coon Creek, Miners Ravine and other salmon/steelhead bearing streams.
- Development of a conservation strategy for salmon and steelhead for the Placer County Conservation Plan (PCCP)

#### **STATUS AND NEXT STEPS**

NID is exploring various fish passage improvement alternatives at the Hemphill Dam facility. Placer County has met and will continue to meet with its federal, state and local partners. Stakeholder engagement has never been greater. Within the Auburn Ravine watershed, the County's goal is to get all migrating salmonids uninterrupted passage to prime spawning habitat above the Hemphill Dam.

The Planning Services Division will continue to evaluate opportunities within the Coon Creek and Dry Creek watersheds to improve fish passage, water quality, and water temperature as part of the mission associated with the implementation of the Placer Legacy program. Once the PCCP is adopted, implementation of the PCCP conservation strategy for salmon and steelhead will supplement the efforts of the Placer Legacy program and those efforts of the wildlife agencies and non-profit stakeholders. Recent successes have shown that ongoing monitoring combined with the successful implementation of projects is reversing a 60+ year negative trend for salmon and steelhead populations in western Placer County and that the fish populations in the future may once again reflect the populations of the past.

An overall summary of the chronology of events that resulted in the modification of the NID Gaging Station is included as Attachment B.

**FISCAL IMPACT**

There are no fiscal impacts associated with this report. Implementation of the ecosystem restoration plans for salmon and steelhead and the PCCP will be funded by mitigation payments, grants and gifts. The Planning Services Division's budget has sufficient revenues to support the efforts of staff at this time

**SUMMARY**

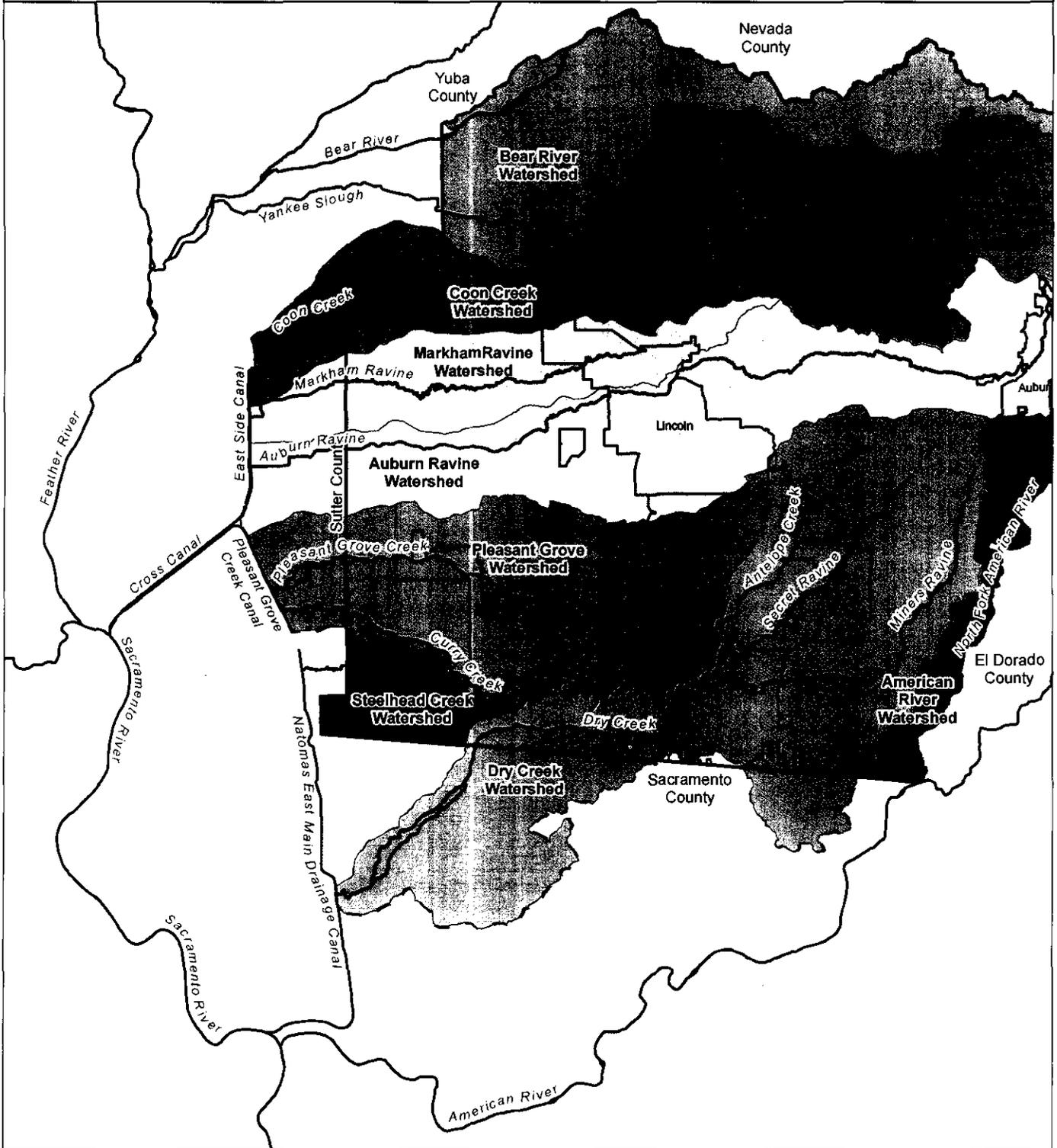
No action is necessary as this status update is intended to generate discussion and feedback from the Board regarding the future of Chinook salmon and Steelhead in western Placer County. County staff will continue to work with its project partners on projects and project funding and will return to the Board if future direction or action is warranted.

**ATTACHMENTS:**

- Attachment A: Watershed Map of Western Placer County
- Attachment B: Auburn Ravine Fish Passage Project Timeline

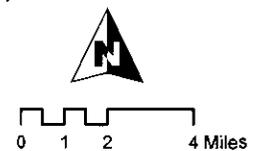
cc: David Boesch, County Executive Officer  
Jennifer Merino, Board of Supervisors Office  
Karen Schwab, County Counsel's Office  
Loren Clark, Assist Director CDRA

# American Basin Watersheds



## LEGEND

 AMERICAN RIVER WS	 COON CREEK WS	 PLEASANT GROVE WS	 CITY
 AUBURN RAVINE WS	 DRY CREEK WS	 STEELHEAD CREEK WS	
 BEAR RIVER WS	 MARKHAM RAVINE WS		



## Auburn Ravine Fish Passage Restoration: Project Background

*Note: Placer County staff was engaged as the project lead or offering technical assistance to the Nevada Irrigation District (NID) throughout all project phases outlined below.*

1997

A dialog/discussion begins on the future of fish and water quality in Auburn Ravine.

April 2002

The CalFed funded "Auburn Ravine/Coon Creek Ecosystem Restoration Plan" recognizes fish passage as a limiting factor for Salmonids in Auburn Ravine. The NID Gaging Station is singled out as a priority.

July 2005

The NID Gaging Station is identified as a priority project by the Auburn Ravine/Coon Creek Watershed Group, which included Placer County, Sierra Club, NID and PCWA, through a stakeholder driven facilitation process.

September 2005

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), National Marine Fisheries Service designates Auburn Ravine critical habitat for the federally threatened Central Valley Steelhead.

September 2005 to May 2007

County conducts a series of stakeholder meetings to build support for the project and secure matching funds.

January 2006

Project feasibility study completed.

July 2006

The Cosumnes, American, Bear, and Yuba (CABY) Integrated Regional Water Management Plan (IRWMP) identifies Auburn Ravine Fish Passage Restoration Project as a top priority for the region.

November 2006

California Dept of Fish Game (DFG) completes fish assessment study. DFG declares that Auburn is one the of best trout streams in the entire western Sierra region.

April 2007

Dry Creek Conservancy is awarded a \$55,000 grant from the Bella Vista Foundation for the Auburn Ravine Fish Passage Restoration Project.

June 2007

Placer County is awarded \$340,000 CalFed Watershed Program Grant, \$304,000 which is earmarked for fish passage improvements.

June 5, 2007

Placer County selects a consultant for the Auburn Ravine Fish Passage Restoration Project.

2008 through 2009

State Bond Freeze and project delays setback project completion date.

2010

A re-assessment of the design alternatives and the feasibility of barrier removal, as well as permit completion projections, delay project by one year.

October 2010

Chinook salmon sighted within project area; a result of work by Save Auburn Ravine Salmon and Steelhead (SARSAS), Dry Creek Conservancy, South Sutter Water District, NOAA, DFG, and Placer County working with downstream flash-board dam operators and owners.

February/March 2011

California Environmental Quality Act review, resulting in a Mitigated Negative Declaration, completed.

April 2011 through October 2011

Permit phase completed.

November 2011

Fish ladder constructed.

November 2012

Chinook salmon ascend the fish ladder at the Gaging Station site.