



American River Group Notes

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Thursday, August 20, 2026

Action Items

- Reclamation to inquire about whether the systemwide exceedance tables used for operational planning could be shared with ARG participants.
- CDFW and Reclamation to coordinate regarding MRR calculations, including how flood-control releases and spill are incorporated.
- Reclamation and CDFW to coordinate with Cramer to coordinate redd dewatering assessments if fall flow reductions warrant additional analysis.
- ARG participants to complete the poll for the SDM Ad Hoc meeting if they have not already done so.
- Kearns & West to send out holds for SDM Power Bypass discussion for early to mid September.

Introductions

1. USBR: Brian Willard, Drew Loney, Kevin Thielen, John (Wes) Harrison, Andrea Hamilton, Randi Field, Tony Yang, Katherine (Mandy) Migura
2. NMFS: Carrie Skorcz, Sam Pyros, Paula Higginson
3. USFWS: Craig Anderson, Erika Holcombe
4. CDFW: Andrew Gaan, Duane Linander, Emily Fisher, Jason Julianne, Crystal Rigby, Molly Shea, Mechele Pacheco, Nicolas Bauer, Myrna Giraldo Perez
5. California Department of Parks and Recreation: N/A
6. SWRCB: Travis Dennis
7. Water Districts: N/A
8. City of Sacramento: Ryan Palmer, Brian Sanders

9. Environmental Council of Sacramento: N/A
10. FiSHBIO: Emily Jonagan
11. Sacramento Regional Water Authority: Michelle Banonis
12. City of Roseville: Sean Bigley
13. Cramer Fish Sciences: Kirsten Sellheim, Mollie Ogaz
14. City of Folsom: N/A
15. DWR: John Ford
16. EBMUD: I-Pei Hsiu
17. SMUD: Tyler Belarde
18. PCWA: Benjamin Barker
19. WAPA: Eric Mork
20. SJWD: Greg Zlotnick
21. CVP SOD Ag Districts: N/A
22. Water Forum: Ashlee Casey
23. PSMFC: Hunter Morris
24. USACE: N/A
25. CBEC Engineering: N/A
26. Shingle Springs Band of Miwok Indians: N/A
27. Carmichael Water District (CWD): N/A
28. CSUS: DeDe Birch
29. BKS Law Firm: N/A
30. Kleinschmidt: Vanessa Martinez
31. Watercourse Engineering: N/A
32. Stantec: Stephanie Theis, Adam Witt
33. Sunzi Consulting: N/A

34. Other: Paul Helliher, Rod Hall, Craig Addley, Brian Mahardja

35. Kearns & West: Karis Johnston, Katy Kennedy

Announcements

- CDFW introduced Skyler Berson, a new district fisheries biologist who will take over responsibility for Lower American River carcass surveys.

Housekeeping

N/A

Operations Forecast

SMUD

1. SMUD reported that the current water year is tracking near average, with precipitation at Fresh Pond expected to finish at approximately 90% of average. SMUD noted that there is currently no snowpack remaining in the watershed.
2. Storage in Loon Lake, Ice House Reservoir, and Union Valley Reservoir remains above average for this time of year, although storage is somewhat lower than last year due to warmer summer conditions and increased hydroelectric generation. SMUD is retaining some storage in anticipation of potential late-summer heat events.
3. Releases below Chili Bar are projected to be below average during October and November and into early December due to planned powerhouse unit outages and associated maintenance.
4. SMUD provided supplemental information regarding El Nino conditions and historical precipitation patterns. While current forecasts indicate a strong El Nino, SMUD noted that historical data do not demonstrate sufficient predictive power to conclude that El Nino conditions will result in an above or below-average water year for the central Sierra.

PCWA

1. French Meadows Reservoir is at approximately 75% capacity, and Hell Hole Reservoir is approximately at 64% capacity. Combined storage is approximately 235 TAF, representing approximately 69% of capacity and 99% of the historical average.
2. Inflows to French Meadows, Hello Hole, and the Rubicon system are currently very low, with seven-day averages below 5 cfs. PCWA reported seven-day average flows of approximately 775 cfs on the Middle Fork American River and 915 cfs on the North Fork American River.

3. Combined storage has decreased by approximately 47 TAF over the last 30 days, including approximately 14 TAF from French Meadows and 32 TAF from Hell Hole.
4. PCWA continues summer hydroelectric operations while maintaining recreational releases on the Middle Fork American River and environmental flows consistent with its FERC license.
5. The State Water Resources Control Board issued an order approving PCWA's 2026 Petition for Temporary Change on August 10. PCWA planned to begin transfer releases on August 21, with approximately 21,053 AF of surplus Middle Fork Project water to be released to Folsom Reservoir through September 30.

Central Valley Operations

Reclamation

1. Folsom Reservoir storage was approximately 514 TAF on August 18, essentially at the 15-year average for this time of year and above the previous year's storage. Water year inflow to Folsom is approximately 2,306 TAF, or 96% of the 15-year average. Precipitation at Blue Canyon is approximately 93% of average.
2. Folsom releases were approximately 4,500 cfs at the time of the meeting, compared with approximately 2,000 cfs at the same time last year. Reclamation planned to reduce releases to 4,000 cfs on August 21 and 3,500 cfs on August 23, with additional reductions anticipated as Delta conditions are monitored.
3. Reclamation noted that July releases were substantially lower than August releases, resulting in a similar overall volume of water being released across the two months but distributed differently.
4. Since the July ARG meeting, releases increased to approximately 5,000 cfs in late July before being reduced to approximately 4,750 cfs on August 14 and 4,500 cfs on August 15. Reclamation reported that releases have been made through the powerplant, with no significant spill associated with negative pricing or maintenance concerns.
5. Reclamation reported that Folsom Reservoir reached approximately 960 TAF earlier in the year and has since undergone seasonal drawdown. Under the draft 90% operations outlook, Folsom storage is projected to decline to approximately 429 TAF at the end of August, 383 TAF at the end of September, and 295 TAF at the end of November.
6. Temperature management remains a key operational consideration. Upper shutters on all three Folsom units were removed on August 3 after the reservoir reached an elevation of 431 feet, consistent with Reclamation's

operating procedure to avoid air entrainment. Unit 3's middle shutter was subsequently raised on August 20, allowing access to cooler water approximately 26 feet below the previous withdrawal elevation.

7. Following the removal of the upper shutters, Folsom Dam release temperatures increased from approximately 62.8 F to 67.4 F. Reclamation noted that Watt Avenue temperatures were approaching the 68 F compliance target and were expected to increase further through the weekend.
8. Reclamation indicated that the reduced releases planned for late August could further increase temperature-management challenges because lower flows take longer to travel through Lake Natoma and downstream, providing additional opportunity for warming.
9. Recent Folsom Reservoir profiles show continued warming and drawdown of the reservoir's temperature layers. Reclamation noted that current conditions are warmer near the surface than many historical mid-August profiles but remain generally within the historical range at depth. The August 18 profile showed continued evolution of the coldwater pool as the reservoir is drawn down.
10. Reclamation's draft 2026 operations outlook includes a 90% exceedance scenario in which Folsom releases decline from approximately 4,786 cfs in August to 1,600 cfs in September; 1,500 cfs in October; and 1,343 cfs in November. The corresponding end-of-month storage projections are approximately 429, 383, 332, and 295 TAF, respectively.
11. Minimum Release Requirements for August remain approximately 1,595 cfs. Reclamation noted that actual August releases are substantially above the MRR but are expected to decline as releases are reduced. Under the current water-year calculations, the MRR is expected to decrease to approximately 795 cfs beginning in October.

Questions/Comments

1. PCWA asked how flood-control operations are initiated under the current flood-control plan and FIRO framework and whether the information used to make those decisions is available to ARG participants.
 - a. Reclamation explained the flood-control operations are based on real-time coordination with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, upstream forecast information, and multiple modeling tools. Reclamation noted that the process is most active from November through March, while summer and fall operations involve ongoing coordination based on forecasts and reservoirs conditions.
2. CDFW raised concerns regarding projected fall and winter flows below Nimbus, particularly the potential decline from approximately 1,300 cfs in November

to approximately 800 cfs in December. They noted the potential for redd dewatering during and after the full-run Chinook spawning period.

a. Reclamation indicated that releases are expected to decline toward the minimum beginning in September as conditions become drier. Reclamation noted that the current outlook does not include PCWA transfer water or potential fall precipitation and acknowledged that the approximately 800 cfs level could create concerns given the issues observed when flows were reduced to approximately 1,000 cfs the previous summer. Reclamation noted that maintaining a more stable minimum flow earlier in the season could help avoid encouraging spawning in areas that could subsequently be dewatered.

b. Water Forum (confirm/Ashlee Casey) noted that redd dewatering does not factor into MRR calculations until January, reinforcing the value of establishing a stable flow before the fall spawning period.

c. CFS noted that similar dewatering assessments have been conducted previously and that CFS could evaluate potential dewatering using aerial imagery and inundation information if there is interest. They shared a paper from several years ago that includes a description of redd dewatering estimates from the American River during the 2014 drought <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/fme.12432>.

3. CDFW asked whether Reclamation could provide the systemwide exceedance tables used for operational planning.

a. Reclamation agreed to inquire about whether the additional information could be shared with ARG participants.

4. CDFW asked how flood-control releases and spill are incorporated when calculating MRR.

a. Reclamation explained that flood control is not represented by a single readily accessible calculation. In general, releases above MRR may be considered flood-control releases when inflows or storage are high and Delta conditions allow additional releases. Reclamation offered to work with CDFW and other participants to review historical calculations and develop a practical approach for estimating the information needed for MRR discussions.

Fisheries Update

CDFW Updates

1. CDFW reported that staff are preparing for the upcoming carcass and redd survey season on the Lower American River.

Water Forum/Cramer Fish Sciences Updates

1. Cramer Fish Sciences provided an update on dissolved oxygen monitoring in Lake Natoma and the Lower American River. A logger has been installed below Folsom to monitor dissolved oxygen and temperature conditions.
2. Monitoring data indicate that dissolved oxygen conditions are beginning to approach the stress threshold for adult Chinook salmon in the Nimbus Basin. Conditions improve farther downstream.

Questions/Comments

1. CDFW asked whether Reclamation would consider spill to increase dissolved oxygen if concentrations remain consistently below approximately 7 mg/L.
 - a. Reclamation noted that a small amount of spill from Lake Natoma was used last year to address Lower American River conditions following fisheries caucus discussions. Reclamation expects to use a similar process this year as spawning begins around October 1 if conditions warrant. Reclamation emphasized that there are no immediate plans for spill but that the agency is prepared to evaluate and address dissolved oxygen conditions similarly to last year.

PSFMC Updates

1. Genetic results have been received for spring- and winter-run Chinook salmon captured during sampling.
2. One genetically confirmed winter-run Chinook salmon and two genetically confirmed spring-run Chinook salmon were captured during the sampling season.
3. The genetic data have been posted to EDI.
<https://portal.edirepository.org/nis/mapbrowse?packageid=edi.1047.6>

Structured Decision Making (SDM) Overview

SDM Process

1. Brian Mahardja (Brian) provided an overview of the structured decision-making process used for the 2025 power bypass decision and discussed how the process may be applied to the 2026 power bypass decision.
2. The SDM process is intended to provide a more transparent and collaborative framework for complex decisions involving tradeoffs among multiple objectives. Brian described the process as a five-step framework involving problem definition, objectives, alternatives, consequences, and tradeoffs/action.
3. Brian reviewed the 2025 process, including the three primary objectives: improving conditions for fall-run Chinook salmon, maintaining or maximizing hydropower generation, and improving conditions for steelhead.

Performance metrics included an adult population index for Chinook salmon, foregone hydropower generation, and the number of days providing ideal steelhead rearing conditions.

4. Brian emphasized the importance of identifying alternatives early in the process because alternatives were developed with input from ARG participants and included no-bypass and multiple power-bypass scenarios.
5. Brian reviewed the outcome of the 2025 process and explained that the highest-ranked alternative was not ultimately selected. Reclamation selected PB4 after considering the relative contribution of the different objectives and the desire to balance fisheries benefits and hydropower impacts.
6. Brian noted that the SDM process does not eliminate the need for management judgement but provides a more transparent framework for distinguishing scientific analysis from policy and management decisions.
7. For 2026, ARG participants will continue to have opportunities to contribute to the SDM process, including identifying objectives and alternatives and providing input on the relative importance of different objectives.

Questions/Comments

1. CDFW asked whether the temperature profiles used to inform the mortality and life-cycle models will continue to be provided to ARG participants.
 - a. Brian confirmed that the temperature profiles will continue to be incorporated into the salmon life-cycle models.
 - b. K&W noted that the relevant information is expected to be available before the first SDM Ad Hoc meeting, and Reclamation will incorporate the updated information.
 - c. Reclamation indicated that model data and results are intended to remain available to ARG participants. Results are shared through plots and the RSHINY application, and additional data can be provided upon request.
2. Reclamation noted the importance of maintaining transparency and collaboration throughout the 2026 SDM process, including providing sufficient information to understand how alternatives are evaluated and how the final decision is reached.

Next Meeting

- The first ad hoc meeting for the Structured Decision Making Power Bypass discussion is anticipated to be scheduled between September 9th-12th.
- The next regularly scheduled ARG meeting is on Thursday, September 17, 2026.