

A Vision for a Vibrant Future in the Sacramento Valley

The Northern California Water Association (NCWA) and leaders in the region envision a vibrant future for the Sacramento Valley built upon healthy rivers, landscapes, and communities. The Sacramento Valley's future depends upon managing water for multiple benefits from ridgetop to river mouth through integrated and collaborative stewardship that connects our rivers and creeks with forests, farms and ranches, floodplains, communities, and groundwater aquifers into one functional landscape. Water is the essential resource that millions of people, thousands of farms, and our communities all depend upon, while also nourishing the millions of birds and fish that live in this region.

Four Key Strategies to Achieve Our Long-Term Goals

Safe Drinking Water for All



Sustainable Groundwater Supplies



Stable Surface Water Supply Operations



Collaboration & Partnership Building



Safe Drinking Water for All & the Human Right to Water

Sacramento Valley leaders are committed to expanding and ensuring access to safe, clean, affordable drinking water for all communities. Through the [North State Drinking Water Solutions Network](#), NCWA supports comprehensive state and regional partnerships to help communities develop and maintain reliable and affordable drinking water supplies.

We also recognize that healthy watersheds are critical to support water quality. Agricultural Water Quality Coalitions are actively working with landowners across the region, other dischargers, and the Regional Water Quality Board to ensure water quality for cities and rural communities, fish and wildlife, and farms. [See Ensuring Water Quality for Communities, Ecosystems and Farms and Film.](#)



Stable Surface Water Supply Operations:

Regional Efficiency as the Foundation for Sustainable Water Management

The foundation for water management in the Sacramento Valley is described in [Efficient Water Management: Investing in California's Future](#), a collaboration led by water managers throughout the region to help guide and improve water management actions for the future.

The Sacramento Valley, as the northern part of the Great Central Valley, functions as a “flow-through” system (a large funnel), where unused water returns to rivers or aquifers and is continually reused downstream to provide multiple benefits. This hydrology shapes water management approaches on every river, creek, and aquifer throughout the region.

The management collaboration focuses on the importance of sustainable water management in the Sacramento Valley and emphasizes that a well-functioning Sacramento Valley is critical to California's long-term health and viability. The region provides 75% of the water used by California's



economy, ecosystems, and communities. [See Sacramento River Basin Water.](#)

The report frames water management as a sustainability objective that requires balancing the triple bottom line: economic viability, ecological protection, and social and community well-being. Water policy decisions involve tradeoffs; therefore, water resource managers in the region will continually refine operations to pursue collaborative, locally driven water management policies that recognize that communities, working agricultural landscapes, and ecosystems are all interconnected.

Water Management for Healthy Rivers & Landscapes

Over the past several decades, the Sacramento Valley has pioneered collaborative strategies that build upon the sustainability foundation with functional flows and habitat for salmon and fisheries on every major river and creek, while maintaining community reliability during dry years, sustaining farms, food production, wildlife refuges, wetlands, and biodiversity. This includes a [Holistic Approach for Healthy Rivers and Landscapes](#) with the following:

River Agreements

The American River [Water Forum Agreement](#); the [Putah Creek Decree](#); the [Drought Protection Program](#) on the Sacramento River, and the [Yuba Accord](#). These arrangements all support modern flow management that emphasizes adaptive operations, cold-water management for salmon, and science-based decision-making, benefiting both water supplies in the region and other parts of the state through improved water reliability and water transfers. [See Re-Managed Flows](#).

The Healthy Rivers & Landscapes Program

The [Healthy Rivers & Landscapes Program](#) developed by water suppliers throughout California, working with state and federal agencies, as a modern, collaborative approach to water management for the Bay-Delta and its watershed. For the past fifty years, the Bay-Delta has been California's water battle ground with fish and wildlife and water supply reliability declining. This Bay-Delta update advances a collaborative and adaptive approach that integrates river flows with essential habitat and floodplain reactivation and a supporting governance and science program. The Healthy Rivers and Landscapes program is designed to restore ecological function while sustaining communities, agriculture, recreation, and hydropower.

Floodplain Forward

[Floodplain Forward](#) is a landscape approach that reconnects rivers with their historic floodplains to provide multiple benefits. Through partnerships among conservation organizations, farmers, water suppliers, scientists and local governments, floodplains are being reactivated to mimic natural processes, and a place fish and wildlife recognize in the Sacramento Valley. Reactivated floodplains provide flood protection for communities, food and safe haven for salmon and migratory birds, groundwater recharge opportunities, and climate resilience. This includes water devoted to flood bypasses, ricelands, wildlife refuges, and riparian habitats. By slowing and spreading water across the landscape during key non-flood periods, the Sacramento Valley can maximize the value of every drop of water and every acre of land, blending nature-based solutions with built infrastructure working together in harmony.

Watershed Management

California's forests, watersheds, rangelands, farms and communities are one interconnected system. Healthy headwaters are integral to public safety, water security, rural economies and the environmental health and well-being of the entire state. Water suppliers, nonprofit organizations and local governments are working together to advance healthy and resilient watersheds—from ridgetop to river mouth—as an essential strategy for adapting water infrastructure, reviving rural communities, and restoring and protecting the ecosystems upon which all Californians depend.

21st Century Water Infrastructure

The Sacramento Valley depends upon backbone infrastructure for public safety, reliable water supplies, recreation, and hydropower. In addition to maintaining this important infrastructure, California needs new modern infrastructure to support water management for multiple benefits, including:

Sites Reservoir

Sites Reservoir is a critical 21st-century project for California that captures water during wet periods and stores it for use in drier years. As an offstream regulating reservoir designed to store high-runoff flows for future use, Sites Reservoir will enhance drought resilience, provide dedicated environmental water, improve operational flexibility, and support ecosystems, communities, and farms—particularly during dry years.

Sites Reservoir complements and strengthens these efforts, helping to stabilize California's water system amid increasingly volatile weather patterns. [See Sites Reservoir.](#)

Conveyance and Weirs

Conveyance and weirs to ensure flood protection and water can be delivered in a timely and reliable manner to serve cities and rural communities, farms, refuges and reactivated floodplains and habitat for fish and wildlife, hydropower, and groundwater recharge.

Modern Hatcheries

Modern hatcheries as part of a holistic approach to support robust salmon runs in the Sacramento Valley.

The Effective Administration of California's Water System During Drier Years

The water rights priority system has continually evolved and worked in the Sacramento Valley for more than a century, including the last two extended dry periods. This system will continue to modernize and improve to effectively serve water for multiple benefits and changing values. This only happens through hard, technical work, as water suppliers and the State Water Board have an active and ongoing working dialogue to improve the water rights and data systems. [See A Modernizing Water System for California.](#)

Sacramento River Basin & the Delta



Sustainable Groundwater Supplies:



A Pathway for Dry Year Resilience

Groundwater sustainability is essential to the Sacramento Valley's economic, environmental, and social future. The ability to access groundwater is increasingly important to communities, farms, and ecosystems, particularly during dry years. For this groundwater to be reliable, the aquifer systems as natural infrastructure must be actively managed alongside rivers, creeks, and reservoirs to achieve water balance and avoid subsidence and impacts to local communities. Sustainable groundwater

management depends on the strong partnership of local agencies working with the Department of Water Resources, focusing on groundwater recharge, demand management, and coordinated surface and groundwater operations. The Sacramento Valley is advancing a regional approach to ensure groundwater sustainability by 2042. [See A Pathway for the Future: Sustainable Groundwater Management in the Sacramento Valley.](#)



Collaboration & Partnerships

To implement this Sacramento Valley vision requires collaboration among water managers, conservation organizations, farmers and landowners, fisherman, researchers, local, state, and federal agencies, and tribal and community leaders. Every program described above depends upon a diverse and hard-working partnership. [See Collaboration.](#)



**FLOODPLAIN
FORWARD**

A Vibrant Water Future for California

The leaders in the Sacramento Valley envision a future where communities are safe from flooding; people have safe and reliable drinking water; farms remain the economic engine with productive and sustainable working landscapes for food production and vital ecosystems with biodiversity; and fish and wildlife are supported by healthy rivers, creeks, and water on the landscape in floodplains and watersheds—all working together in harmony.

Water is the essential resource that sustains this harmony. Through innovation, partnerships, hard work, and integrated water management, the Sacramento Valley can continue sourcing a sustainable and vibrant future for California.

A wide-angle photograph of a Sacramento Valley landscape at sunrise. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a warm, golden glow over the scene. In the background, a range of mountains is silhouetted against the bright sky. The middle ground shows a vast, flat landscape with scattered trees and shrubs. The foreground is a field of dry grass, also bathed in the golden light.

Join us in shaping a vibrant future for the Sacramento Valley. Visit norcalwater.org to learn more and stay connected, and share your thoughts with us at info@norcalwater.org.