

**“We are constantly
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— Willie Whittlesey



Pictured: Willie Whittlesey

NCWA
Northern California Water Association



The TreeGazer

His neck bent backward allowing his eyes the chance to follow the bark line to the top of the towering pines reaching toward the majestic blue above. Beneath his gaze flowed a forest green ocean of pine needles pinching the branches as so they would not be lost to the wind. The whistling sound the breeze made as it forced itself between tree gaps sung in harmony with the crackle of the splintered sticks and shattered leaves that fell victim to a pair of Danner boots exploring the forest floor. Whether he was searching for it or not, Willie had found it.

The beauty and peace this place offered burrowed itself deep into Willie soul, leaving an impression that would remain for a lifetime. Still in his teenage years, Willie's career was not a chart-topping concern consuming the brain, but there was little doubt that "out here" is where Willie Whittlesey needed to be.

Working with his uncle, a timber faller in Nevada County, provided an education in how drought can make a significant impact on higher elevations. A topic less commonly discussed back then, as it is today.

"I didn't know it at the time, but that real-life experience in the forest played a big role in how I think about water management and conservation today," said Whittlesey.

His passion for the forests and a career in water management were destined to meet head on. Willie joined the Yuba Water Agency to help with hydropower sales but in short time, he would become the agency's general manager. Willie is now charged with helping manage one of the most historic river systems in Northern California. At the crest where its headwaters stand 8000 feet above the Pacific Ocean, the Yuba River travels a distance of 100 miles west where it settles at 70 feet above sea level at the confluence of the Feather River south of Marysville.

It is near the base where the Yuba Water Agency is responsible for assisting in flood protection, hydropower generation, water quality standards and water deliveries to landowners. While it may appear most of the agency's duties are focused on parts of the valley, Willie believes in a much different approach.

"We want to be seen as a solution to the many challenges we are facing in the state. To do that, you must take on a top-down viewpoint."

Which means thinking about where that first drop of water falls at the summit to when it exits the watershed in the Feather River. Willie believes this ridgetop to river mouth approach is the best way to ensure water security and quality for not only Yuba Water Agency's users, but everyone in the north state.

Willie's passion and forward-thinking has led the agency to engage in several more collaborative partnerships and initiatives in hopes that they can reduce catastrophic wild fires from having devastating impacts on wildlife habitat, homes, working lands and the water supply. With the intensity of the fires and an increasing number of drier years, Willie believes agencies can no longer take a siloed or single-focus when it comes to water management.

"We are constantly evolving, and we're going to have to adapt if we want to protect our way of life here."

Willie no longer spends his days amongst the firs and pines, but when he needs a reminder of how he got to Marysville, it is only a short drive along Highway 20 to the place where this all began. While the journey is far from over, the entire Yuba watershed is much better off having Willie Whittlesey on its side, as there is little doubt, he can truly see the forest from the trees.

