

Achieving Environmental Justice Goals Downstream in North Sacramento

The Role of Building & Expressing Community Capacity Both Upstream & Downstream

A Section 319(h) NPS Program Success Story



Waterbody Improved: Dry Creek (Placer County) downstream through to Steelhead Creek (formerly called the NEMDC or Natomas East Main Drainage Canal), which it flows into. A twelve mile section of Steelhead Creek was listed in the 1998 Water Quality Assessment for elevated fish tissue levels, toxic bioassay results, and general aquatic life impairments just prior to the start of this five year (to date) project. Dry Creek upstream was not listed at that time, although significant pesticides have been found in that upstream area of the watershed recently.

The latest Water Quality Assessment, 2002, shows the 3.5 miles of Steelhead Creek downstream from the confluence with Arcade Creek listed for Diazinon from agriculture, and urban runoff/storm sewers (medium TMDL priority), and for PCB's from industrial point sources, agriculture, and urban runoff/storm sewers (low TMDL priority). Steelhead Creek is also listed for PCB's, with the same potential sources and low TMDL priority, for the 12 miles upstream of it's confluence with Arcade Creek. Dry Creek remains unlisted in the 2002 Water Quality Assessment.

Short Problem Statement: In 1998, the overall presenting watershed issue was insufficient community capacity downstream in North Sacramento/Del Paso Heights area to restore historic and well appreciated Chinook salmon and steelhead runs. These salmon & steelhead runs support both environmental and community health, and Steelhead Creek itself has a long and continuing history as a frequently fished local stream.

Local stakeholders realized the opportunity of ‘Community Capacity Building’ upstream in the Dry Creek watershed where both development dollars and watershed restoration grants were available to fund upstream restoration efforts. This community capacity building was achieved with the help of a NPS 319(h) training grant supporting stream bioassessment training for volunteers. Combined upstream grants building community capacity led to broad downstream Environmental Justice goals being reached.

Environmental Justice is defined by state law as the fair treatment of people of all races, cultures, and incomes with respect to the development, adoption, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. Environmental Justice is currently being implemented more broadly in the state than in prior years, but still has considerable ‘unfunded mandate’ characteristics.

Community capacity building was also occurring downstream, in the Environmental Justice qualified neighborhoods, but at a slower pace than upstream due to the many distractions and challenges of the lower income population downstream.

The management practices implemented included community engagement through work on grants, existing community events, community meetings, and informational updates to decision makers including city staff and managers, and elected officials. Many direct actions such as cleanups and native riparian tree plantings and maintenance were also involved, as well as water pollution prevention education leading to household, business, school and church behavioral changes to lessen NPS pollutants at their local urban sources.

Project Highlights: Very broad partnerships/stakeholder inclusion in partly U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (US EPA) funded (many funding and grant partners, also) ‘Community Capacity Building’, and Environmental Justice issue awareness downstream, among both community decision-makers and general members. Also, extensive Sacramento Flood Control Agency (SAFCA) restoration projects, and City of Sacramento grants also funded much restoration, and indirectly, focussed critical community attention on the Environmental Justice issues and downstream environmental health deterioration.

Success of considerable stream restoration along much of the waterways has now achieved a documented (by volunteer citizen bioassessment monitors) increased return of both Chinook salmon spawning adults and steelhead to the entire watershed region. The salmon are spawning in increased numbers in Dry Creek.

Strategy Outline and Phases of Implementation: The overall strategy was to build community capacity both downstream and upstream with grants, coordinated with city, county, and regional governmental assistance, and volunteer community action. This approach also sought to build support and understanding of the need for Environmental Justice awareness and local implementation. More focus was placed on community decisions and practices downstream using all resources available for this effort; and local/regional civic & environmental leadership was developed to support and implement the same.

Stream bioassessment trained volunteers upstream monitored the health of the biota feeding the young salmon fingerlings upstream, as well as reporting and therefore limiting the effects of excess development siltation to the stream. These latter actions protected historic salmonid spawning areas upstream. Overall, upstream watershed restoration efforts were coordinated with stream bioassessment monitoring through watershed groups and general community engagement.

Outcomes: Outcomes include more substantive documented watershed restoration and the related water quality improvements, more community awareness and engagement demonstrated through sustainable stewardship activities growing considerably over the five year period; and increasing salmon and steelhead returns to Dry Creek for spawning. Observable (and photographed) watershed restoration includes many acres, as well as creek and river miles of riparian and wetland plantings, native riparian stands protection, as well as their natural expansion, and up to thousands of birds from the Pacific Flyway overwintering in new restoration sites. Watershed restoration has also resulted in general improvements in overall water quality, such as less siltation from storm runoff, and documented larger salmon & steelhead returns.

Increased upstream and downstream riparian and wetland wildlife of all kinds, as well as increased human recreational use of the watershed, recreational facilities construction and planning of more are also involved.

Working restoration models were shared regionally, and some more broadly through more formal agency technical assistance, participation in conferences, extensive internet or public web postings, watershed group meetings, and other stakeholder meetings and on-going discussion, both formal and informal.

Partners and Funding: Partners included, but are not limited to, the Dry Creek Conservancy, Placer County Resource Conservation District (RCD), Sacramento Area Flood Control Agency (SAFCA), American River Flood Control District (ARFCD), City & County of Sacramento, Placer County, State Water Resources Control Board or State Water Board (SWRCB), Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board, City of Roseville, Sacramento River Watershed Program (SRWP), Sierra Club, Environmental Council of Sacramento (ECOS), North Sacramento Chamber of Commerce, the American River Parkway Preservation Society, numerous other watershed and community groups, as well as numerous citizen volunteers upstream and downstream working cooperatively.

In addition to 319(h) Dry Creek Rapid Bioassessment Monitoring and Public Outreach (Community Capacity Building grant funding) (\$56,000) from the SWRCB, 'upstream' grants involved in the overall community capacity building effort include the 2002 Secret Ravine Restoration Project (\$40,000 from the SWRCB), the Steelhead Creek Drinking Water Quality Study and Watershed Assessment (\$595,000) grant from CALFED, and the Dry Creek Watershed Flood Control/Restoration (\$2.4 million) from the Department of Water Resources. In addition, there are at least five City of Sacramento Ueda Parkway associated grants downstream; involving a City Ueda Parkway (which is located largely along Steelhead Creek) transportation grant for a connecting multiple use trail (a bikeway), recreational features construction, and planning. Overall, funds in excess of \$1.5 million have probably been expended over the last five years to improve water quality related to improving salmon & steelhead return over the entire watershed.