



# Merced Irrigation District announces Merced River S.A.F.E. Plan

*District proposes mutli-benefit alternative to Bay Delta  
Plan water diversion*

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In direct response to the State Water Board's Bay Delta water-diversion-only plan, today Merced Irrigation District released a comprehensive alternative proposal aimed directly at supporting salmon, agriculture, local water quality and the environment.

The [Merced River S.A.F.E Plan](#) (Salmon, Agriculture, Flows and Environment) seeks to put years of study – and tens of millions of dollars – in scientific research into immediate action. The S.A.F.E. Plan would serve as an alternative approach to furthering the State's Bay Delta goals while still providing protection and certainty to water supply and water quality in eastern Merced County. The plan can be viewed [here](#).

In September, the State Water Board released the long-anticipated Bay Delta Water Quality Control Plan Update, or SED. The plan calls for significant diversions of Merced River water away from eastern Merced County and sends it north toward the San Francisco Bay Delta for the purported benefit of salmon.

This water would normally be stored in MID's Lake McClure for use in eastern Merced County. Merced Irrigation District owns and operates Lake McClure – the District is not connected to the state or federal water projects like most other water agencies and communities in California. The State's diversion of water from the Merced area will have a devastating impact on local groundwater quality used by cities, rural residents and farmers alike, as well as cause peripheral harm to the local environment. It will cost the local economy in the Merced area more than \$230 million in economic activity and nearly 1,000 lost jobs.

MID has spent millions of dollars undertaking the most intense and in-depth scientific research on the Merced River that exists. MID has studied flows, temperatures, biological resources and habitats. MID is

poised to put this research into immediate and direct action through implementation of the S.A.F.E. Plan.

Under the S.A.F.E. Plan:

**FLOWS** – Flows on the Merced River would IMMEDIATELY increase over current obligations. However, the increased flows would rely on sound science and be coupled with eco-system improvements. Flow releases would be made at times proven to benefit migratory salmon. Unlike the State Bay Delta Plan, the S.A.F.E. Plan flow releases would occur in coordination with multiple other efforts to support salmon, including habitat restoration and predation management.

**HABITAT RESTORATION** – More than 5 miles of riparian and salmon-rearing habitat would be restored along the Merced River upstream of the Snelling community. This habitat was altered decades ago by large-scale aggressive dredge mining, which was not associated with MID or its activities. A technical advisory committee, comprised of MID and federal and state agencies, would oversee the comprehensive river restoration and enhancement, and coordinate this work with other ongoing restoration projects.

**INCREASED SALMON HATCHERY PRODUCTION** — MID, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, and other interested agencies would develop and implement a plan to modernize and expand the existing Merced River Salmon Hatchery, increasing production and survival.

**PREDATION MANAGEMENT** – Under the S.A.F.E. Plan, a technical advisory committee, comprised of MID and federal and state agencies, would oversee a comprehensive Merced River Salmonid Predator Management Plan. Key elements would include manually removing bass from the river, filling in bass spawning and rearing areas, many of which occur in isolated, off-channel ponds. All actions aimed at increasing salmonid survival will be considered.

“There is no question that more needs to be done for salmon,” said MID General Manager John Sweigard. “What can be questioned is the methodology. For decades we have sent more water toward the Delta and less water has been diverted for agriculture. It’s clear that salmon are being affected by more than just water.

“We are willing to step forward and try to bring solutions – not fist-pounding – to the table. We are willing to do our part. However, we cannot – and should not – bear the burden for all of the dredging, reclamation, and channelization that has occurred in the Bay Delta. Make no mistake: MID is fully prepared to defend its senior water rights.”

Merced Irrigation District provides surface water from Lake McClure to approximately 2,000 farms in eastern Merced County. The District’s only supply of water is from Lake McClure, which it built. The vast majority of the growers within Merced Irrigation District represent family farms with fewer than 50 acres.

Said MID’s Sweigard: “The Merced River S.A.F.E. Plan seeks to bring people together and create collaboration. It seeks tangible benefits based on taking a holistic approach to supporting the salmon lifecycle while still protecting our community’s agriculture and water quality. We are committed to

bringing forth these solutions and avoiding the kinds of regulatory and legal battles that are entirely too common as we all seek to balance environmental challenges.”

MID Board President Dave Long said that MID growers need certainty of their water supply.

“We are reasonable people,” said Long. “Without settlement on a comprehensive solution to ensure salmon and our community can survive, we will be locked in prolonged legal battles pitting all against all.”

Added Vice President Scott Koehn: “Legal challenges are a high-stakes game, in which one or more parties could potentially lose all. That is not a solution and it is not the way we would prefer to move forward, but we are prepared to do so if necessary. We believe we can work collaboratively to find truly sustainable solutions to these issues.”

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