Battle Creek Watershed Conservancy News

Number 3 December 1997

Battle Creek -
Things are changing

Most of us – old timers and newcomers alike – are probably living in the Battle Creek watershed because we like the environment: wide-open spaces, trees, creeks, critters, crotchety neighbors, views…and like most people we probably don't want things to change too much.

But the outside world, in the form of resource agencies, has discovered this watershed. They have concluded that this watershed needs to be protected, in order to compensate nature for some of the damage done by the great water projects which supply the thirsty south. These agencies have arrived on our doorstep to help preserve the things which have been preserved for generations already by local people.

While some might take offense at outside agencies telling us how to preserve something we have done a pretty good job of preserving all these years, changes are going to take place whether we like it or not. The idea of the Battle Creek Watershed Conservancy is that, if the local people have a say in how changes are implemented, then it is just possible that change can be beneficial to our communities.

Change on Battle Creek is driven by a number of programs:

- An interim agreement between the California Department of Fish and Game (CDF&G) and PG&E is currently affecting the flows on the creek.
- Over the longer term CDF&G and PG&E are also planning to provide improved fish access to the middle reaches of Battle Creek.
- A re-evaluation of the operation of Coleman National Fish Hatchery (CNFH) could result in major changes at the hatchery, including the removal of the barrier currently preventing fall-run salmon from passing beyond the hatchery.
- The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is currently in the midst of a planning effort, studying possible BLM acquisitions and land use from the Bend area along the Sacramento up Battle Creek as far as Darrah Springs hatchery.
- A draft plan is under development by CALFED for the restoration of the upper reaches of the watershed.

This issue of the ***News*** describes the agreement between CDF&G and PG&E in some detail. We also have articles on issues with direct impact on watershed residents: fire and garbage.

The CDF&G/PG&E Agreement

There are two primary limitations to growth of the salmon population on Battle Creek: physical barriers to upstream migration, and lack of adequate water at certain points in the creek. Note that physical habitat is not a significant problem, as Battle Creek habitat is in relatively good shape, unlike some of the other creeks in the Sacramento watershed.

The lowest physical barrier on the creek is the intentional barrier at the Coleman National Fish Hatchery. The large fish ladder at this barrier is blocked for about nine months of the year, to block fall-run chinook salmon from migrating upstream (salmon can also jump over the barrier during times of high water). The purpose is to prevent the introduction of common salmon pathogens into the water used by the hatchery. The barrier is opened after the fall run is over, to allow the late fall run, winter run, and spring run salmon (and some steelhead) to pass upstream.

Other barriers consist of blocked or poorly functioning fish ladders at PG&E dams, and major natural barriers north of Manton on the North Fork and west of Mineral on the South Fork.

At some future date, when other measures are in place at Coleman to prevent disease transmission, the fish ladder at CNFH will be kept open for longer periods of time, to allow increased numbers of salmon upstream, so that the spawning areas of Battle Creek as far up as Manton and Mineral can be fully utilized.

Discussions are under way between the CDF&G and PG&E concerning the installation of better fish ladders at certain PG&E facilities and the possible dismantling of other PG&E facilities. These discussions should result in greatly improved salmon access to the middle reaches of Battle Creek within the next several years.

The other problem for the fish is of course water. Many water diversions, at many points on Battle Creek and its tributaries, take most of the water from the creek. Some of this water is taken for consumptive purposes, but most (about 97%) is taken for power generation.

Most of the water diverted from Battle Creek is diverted by PG&E, and CDF&G has recognized that PG&E is the only potential source of enough water to provide adequate habitat for the increased levels of salmon production planned for Battle Creek.

CDF&G and PG&E have been working on mutually-agreeable plans to provide more water for salmon for a number of years. A hand-shake agreement was reached in August 1995, at which point additional water was provided by PG&E at certain points in the creek. A formal interim agreement followed in February 1996, and negotiations (and a required environmental assessment) are currently in progress for a revised interim agreement, to cover the period from February 1998 through 1999, when a longer-term agreement is contemplated.

The current interim agreement, and the draft revised interim agreement, provide for increased flows beyond those required by the present PG&E licenses. These increased flows reduce the water available to PG&E for power generation, and the resulting revenue loss is covered partly by the Bureau of Reclamation (through funding from Central Valley Project Improvement Act) and partly by voluntary action by PG&E (for which PG&E should be given credit).

The specific changes are as follows:

- The Wildcat Diversion Dam is closed, and no water is to flow in Wildcat Ditch. PG&E is to be reimbursed for 50% of the power which would have been generated from this water.

- The 3 cfs minimum flow previously required below the Eagle Canyon Dam is changed to a target flow of 30 cfs. Of this amount, 12.5 cfs is provided by PG&E at no charge, and PG&E is to be reimbursed for lost power generation for the amount between 12.5 cfs and the 30 cfs target. Some of this water comes from springs in the walls of Eagle Canyon, which are now to be allowed to flow to the creek (previously these flows were tapped by a complex network of small flumes and pipes). This action reduces the flow in the Eagle Canyon Ditch.

- The 5 cfs minimum flow previously required below the Coleman Dam is changed to a target flow of 30 cfs. Of this amount, 12.5 cfs is provided by PG&E at no charge, and PG&E is to be reimbursed for lost power generation for the amount between 12.5 cfs and the 30 cfs target. This action reduces the flow in the Coleman Ditch.

The effect of these measures is to increase the flow in the North Fork below the Eagle Canyon Dam (just below the junction of Digger Creek and the North Fork), and in the South Fork below Coleman Dam (just below Inskip Powerhouse). The flow below Coleman Powerhouse is not changed, as the affected waters already re-enter Battle Creek at that point.

It is probably fair to say that nearly all of those who hold water rights on Battle Creek are concerned that their rights might be diminished, at some time in the future, in order to provide additional water for fish. For the time being it is clear that CDF&G recognizes that PG&E can, and is willing to, furnish adequate water for the projected habitat improvement on Battle Creek, and CDF&G has gone to some trouble to assure us that they have no intent of seeking other water sources (other than possible water purchases from willing sellers – which is an issue in itself). The best action for water holders to take, in addition to keeping abreast of agency activities relating to water rights, is to make sure that they in fact use their water efficiently and beneficially, and to keep good records to demonstrate this.

Fire in the Watershed

One of the proposed actions for Battle Creek in the CALFED draft "Ecosystem Restoration Program Plan" is "to reduce excessive fire fuel loads in the upper watershed."

Most of us in the watershed living between about 1500 and 3000 feet altitude are well aware of the high fuel load in much of the area, where large brushy areas have not burned for several decades. Such high fuel loads make wildfires possible, and the resulting erosion and sediment in the creeks provides the clear link between fire and fish habitat: sediment clogs spawning gravel.

Some of us were able to tour regions of Clear Creek, where a program to reduce fuel load is currently underway under the auspices of the Western Shasta Resource Conservation District. Specific activities include a fuel-load inventory, the construction of "shaded fuel breaks," and subsequent control burns to remove understory brush.

Shaded fuel breaks are not bulldozer-cleared roads, like the typical fire break, but rather trails where the understory is removed while some of the trees are kept, depending upon stand density, albeit with their lower branches removed. The area cleared ranges from 120 to 220 feet wide, depending upon the terrain. Hand work is often required, so they are not cheap, and continued maintenance is required. The breaks provide access for fire equipment, and they provide barriers adequate for control burns.

The control burns in the Clear Creek area are intended to burn only the understory growth. When repeated every five to ten years they greatly reduce the likelihood of wildfires which burn the tree crowns, and such fires as occur tend to be confined to smaller areas. In addition to the fire protection gained, the resulting woodland is more open and a better habitat for many desirable species.

A similar program has aroused great interest in the American River watershed, where the local CRMP, under the auspices of the Placer County Resource Conservation District, and with the coordinated assistance of a large number of agencies including the NRCS, BLM, CDF, USFS, and CDF&G, has constructed their first shaded fuel break.

Since fire hazard is a critical problem in many areas of the Battle Creek watershed, there may be interest in these areas in considering similar fuel management programs, especially if financial and agency assistance can be obtained. The experience gained by other watershed groups in fuel management is available to us if enough Battle Creek landowners are interested in participating in such programs in our watershed.

Garbage…

Garbage has become an issue in the Mineral area where the Battle Creek, Mill Creek, and Deer Creek conservancies come together.

Changes in the general availability of the Mineral transfer station – limited hours and restrictions on users – mean that the numerous visitors to the south side of the Lassen area will have garbage problems. Guests in the Highway 36 corridor will need better options for the disposal of their garbage during the vacation season.

The three conservancies plan to work together on this issue to ensure that adequate services are available to the public, and to prevent inappropriate disposal of waste materials (euphemism for litter!) within the watershed.

If you have suggestions regarding this issue, please contact Watershed Coordinator Laurie Aumack (527-4231) with your ideas.

Conservancy Activities

The Conservancy has extended its reach with meetings in Mineral and Shingletown. Our elves have been busy:

- We had a booth at the "Return of the Salmon Festival."
- We have attended meetings and more meetings: The Battle Creek Working Group, The Bureau of Land Management advisory group, various water meetings, and more.
- We joined with the Spring-Run Workgroup for a guided tour of Eagle Canyon.
- The Conservancy is now incorporated, and the steering committee is working on the bylaws and plans for the general meeting to be held in 1998 to elect directors.

We encourage you to contact us so that you can take part in the organization of the Conservancy and help define it:

Battle Creek Watershed Conservancy
Post Office Box 606
Manton, CA 96059-0606
Fax: 474-1112

Leland Davis 527-5071
Bob Lee 474-3966
Larry Lucas 527-4067(work), 527-6646(home)

In the next issue…

- Articles on the draft "Ecosystem Restoration Program Plan" from CALFED, and the "Upper Watershed Restoration Plan."
- Activities of the US Fish and Wildlife Service on Battle Creek.
- BLM activities on Battle Creek.

December 9	CALFED public meeting, Durham Memorial Hall, Faber & Midway, Durham, 5:30-8:30 PM
December 17	Western Shasta Resource Conservation District meeting, USDA Service Center, Redding (246-5299)
January 6	Tehama County Resource Conservation District meeting, USDA Service Center, Red Bluff (527-4231)
January 7	Clear Creek CRMP meeting, Igo Elementary School, 7:00-9:00 PM (246-5299)
January 8	Northern California Water Conference, Elks Lodge, Red Bluff, 8:30 AM – 3:45 PM (preregister with Claudia Pickard, Tehama County Farm Bureau, 527-7882, $10 fee includes lunch)
January 9	Battle Creek Technical Advisory Working Group meeting, Dept. of Water Resources building, Red Bluff, 10:00 AM – 2:00 PM
January 13	Reeds Creek/Red Bank Creek Landowners Meeting, Red Bluff (location to be announced, 527-4231)
January 21	Spring-run Chinook Salmon Workgroup, Kramore Inn, Chico, 10:00 AM

BATTLE CREEK WATERSHED CONSERVANCY
POST OFFICE BOX 606
MANTON, CA 96059-0606

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