

Chapter 1 – Background

The lower American River is a significant resource of considerable interest to fishery management agencies, the public and Reclamation. Reclamation is responsible for operating the Folsom/Nimbus Dam complex to meet local and downstream water demands, regulatory requirements, and fish habitat needs. Reclamation has a need to consider its operations as they relate to lower American River instream resources, and other concerns of fisheries agencies that have regulatory and fish management responsibilities, as well as to provide the public with a forum to provide and exchange information.

In 1996, Reclamation established a working group for the lower American River (LAR), known as the American River Operations Group (a.k.a., ARG). Reclamation is the lead coordinator of the Group, bringing together those who have either a legislated or resources-specific interest in the operation of Folsom Dam and Reservoir, and the LAR. The formal members include agencies with trust responsibilities for fisheries resources in the LAR: Reclamation, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), and the CA Department of Fish and Game (CDFG). The ARG convenes monthly or more frequently, if needed, with the purpose of providing fishery updates and reports for Reclamation to help manage temperatures and flows for fish resources in the LAR.

The American River Division includes facilities that provide conservation of water on the American River for flood control, fish and wildlife protection, recreation, protection of the Delta from intrusion of saline ocean water, irrigation and M&I water supplies, and hydroelectric power generation. Initially authorized features of the American River Division included Folsom Dam, Lake and Powerplant; Nimbus Dam and Powerplant; and Lake Natoma. Releases from Folsom Dam are re-regulated approximately seven miles downstream by Nimbus Dam. This facility is also operated by Reclamation as part of the Central Valley Project (CVP). Nimbus Dam creates Lake Natoma, which serves as a forebay for the diversions to the Folsom South Canal.

Reclamation continues to work with the Sacramento Water Forum, NMFS, CDFG, and other interested parties to integrate a revised flow management standard for the LAR into CVP operations and water rights. Until this action is adopted by the State Water Resources Control Board, the minimally legal required flows will be defined by D-893, which states that, in the interest of fish conservation, releases should not ordinarily fall below 250 cfs between January 1 and September 15th, or below 500 cfs at other times.

Water temperature control operations in the LAR are affected by many factors and operational tradeoffs. These include available cold water resources, Nimbus release schedules, annual hydrology, Folsom power penstock shutter management flexibility, Folsom Dam Urban Water Supply Temperature Control Device (TCD) management, and Nimbus Hatchery considerations. Shutter and TCD management provide the most operational flexibility in controlling downstream temperatures.

On June 4, 2009, the NMFS issued its Biological Opinion and Conference Opinion on the Long-Term Operations of the Central Valley Project and State Water Project (NMFS BiOp). The ARG was included amongst the four Fisheries and Operations Technical Teams whose function it is to make recommendations for adjusting operations to meet contractual obligations for water delivery and to minimize adverse effects on listed anadromous fish species (see Section 11.2.1.1).

There are several Reasonable and Prudent Alternatives in the NMFS BiOp that discuss minimal flow requirements and temperature objectives for the LAR: Action II.1.; “Lower American River Flow Management” and Action II.2.; “Lower American River Temperature Management”. The objectives of these RPAs are to provide minimum flows for all stages of steelhead and to maintain suitable temperatures to support over-summer rearing of juvenile steelhead. An Annual Operations and Temperature Management Plan is prepared for NMFS’ consideration that takes into consideration discretionary and non-discretionary actions under Reclamation’s authority using iterative modeling techniques (i.e., Coldwater Management Pool model—see Appendix 2-D) to determine whether Reclamation is likely to meet the temperature target throughout the season.

Reclamation convenes the ARG to obtain recommendations. If consensus cannot be achieved within the ARG, the ARG advises NMFS, and NMFS makes a recommendation to the WOMT, per standard operating procedures.

Membership

The ARG consists of representatives from Reclamation, USFWS, NMFS, and DFG. American River Group member agencies and the lead contacts are:

Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation)

Russ Yaworsky – LAR Operator

Bonnie Van Pelt – ARG group facilitator

U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)

Nick Hindman

National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS)

Gary Sprague

California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG)

Robert Vincik