



# THE WATER FORUM AGREEMENT

*A Watershed Agreement for the American River Basin*



*The Lower American River  
Original painting by Stephanie Taylor*

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After four decades of working on California water issues, the most enduring process I have ever experienced is the Sacramento Water Forum Agreement. For the past 20 years, business, environmental, public and water interests have worked collaboratively to plan and implement water and environmental projects. And now, they are working on extending the agreement for at least 20 more years. Trust, shared interests and collaboration are key to this incredible process. Congratulations to those Water Forum people who are making it work.

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*Leo Winternitz,  
former Executive Director,  
the Water Forum*

# FROM CONFLICT TO COLLABORATION

In 2000, 40 agencies and businesses came together to sign the landmark Water Forum Agreement, a visionary long-term plan created to balance two co-equal objectives:

- to provide a reliable and safe water supply for the Sacramento region's long-term growth and economic health; and
- to preserve the fishery, wildlife, recreational and aesthetic values of the lower American River.

At the time the agreement was signed, the region's water supplies and environmental resources were on an unsustainable path. Water providers, already heavily dependent on the lower American River for supplies, were projecting the need to tap the river even more as the region experienced some of the highest population increases in the state. Groundwater levels underlying parts of the basin were in steep decline, a trend that had started more than 40 years earlier. Contamination from military and industrial facilities had shuttered some public groundwater wells. The region already had endured a long history of legal challenges over water supplies and the health of the lower American River.

To address these challenges, the City and County of Sacramento launched the Water Forum negotiations in 1993. Slowly, over the next seven years and thousands of hours of meetings, stakeholders negotiated a plan that would bring cohesion to water management and environmental stewardship on the lower American River.

Now, after 20 years of implementation, the Sacramento region and Water Forum members have an impressive record of working together to implement farsighted water management solutions that have served to protect the river, foster regional vitality and provide benefits that extend beyond the Sacramento region.

“ PCWA, as well as the rest of the region's major water purveyors, home builders (the business caucus) and the environmental community, had a lot riding on the outcome of the Water Forum effort. We started by understanding each other's interests, then we learned to trust each other, and then we became friends. We did important work in challenging times.

*Einar Maisch,*

*participant in the Water Forum Agreement negotiations, former General Manager, Placer County Water Agency*

Water Forum members are a diverse group of business and agricultural leaders, citizen groups, environmentalists, water purveyors and local governments working together to design and implement balanced water use and river management decisions.



The Water Forum Agreement embodies the Sacramento region's values, vision and progress toward meeting the co-equal goals of protecting the lower American River and the region's water supply. But the regional collaboration has reached beyond the Sacramento metropolitan area.

# THE SEVEN ELEMENTS OF THE WATER FORUM AGREEMENT

The Water Forum Agreement includes seven elements that represent the strategies members use to address key issues such as groundwater management, water diversions, dry year water supplies, water conservation and protecting the lower American River.



## FLOW STANDARD

For the past two decades, the Water Forum has been studying and refining guidelines for a flow standard for the lower American River that would provide enough cold water to nurture salmon and steelhead trout while also improving the reliability of water supplies for people. The Water Forum's research has demonstrated that proper flows and cold water are the foundation to fish survival. Temperature, in particular, is considered to be the greatest stressor to species survival.

The Water Forum's Modified Flow Management Standard helps to preserve water storage in Folsom Reservoir to guard against drought and improve water temperature in the lower American River for salmon and steelhead.

The Water Forum's Flow Management Standard (FMS), first implemented in 2006, uses the best available science to set targets for minimum river flows and cold water storage at Folsom Reservoir. The Water Forum

modified the FMS based upon real-world experience during the drought. After 20 years of study and refinement, the Modified FMS is considered the best path forward for protecting and restoring steelhead and fall-run Chinook salmon in the lower American River, and improving the reliability of local water supplies without re-directing negative impacts to other parts of the state.

## CUTTING-EDGE SCIENCE AND ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT

The Water Forum's approach to meeting the co-equal goals has been grounded in cutting-edge science. After two decades, the Water Forum has made significant contributions to the science of anadromous fish and other species that live in the lower American River.

The Water Forum has produced detailed underwater maps of the lower American River to identify ideal locations for enhancing habitat that also avoid impacting flood safety. These studies have also revealed data on fish lifecycles, including spawning and rearing, adaptation and roaming. And, step-by-step adaptive management over the years has helped Water Forum scientists hone in on the exact conditions salmon prefer for spawning, including the right depth for gravel placement, flow, rock size and other parameters.



## HABITAT MANAGEMENT

The Water Forum actively works to restore and improve habitat for fish in the lower American River. In the past decade, the Water Forum has partnered with federal, state and local agencies to invest more than \$7 million to create protected places for salmon and steelhead to reproduce and rear their young. This includes building over 30 acres of spawning beds and 1.2 miles of side channels, which are prime rearing zones.

## GROUNDWATER MANAGEMENT

Groundwater provides over half of the water used in the Sacramento region. The Water Forum Agreement calls for a groundwater management plan to protect this valuable resource that includes systems for monitoring the amount of water withdrawn from the basin and a conjunctive use program to coordinate the use of groundwater and surface water. Over the past two decades, the conjunctive use program has allowed the once over drafted North Area Basin to recover to sustainable levels, as well as provided a path for water providers to decrease reliance on the river during critical habitat periods for endangered fish. During California's recent drought, for example, water providers successfully shifted to using more groundwater, leaving more water to flow down the lower American River for fish and wildlife.

The lower American River is not only a crucial part of the Sacramento region's daily experience and identity, it is a major water supply source for nearly 2 million people and home to 43 fish species, including federally threatened Central Valley steelhead and struggling fall-run Chinook salmon.

The river also is critical to flood protection for Sacramento-area communities, and makes key contributions to the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, which provides drinking water to two-thirds of the state and irrigation to half of California's farming industry.

“ One of my top priorities as a former United States Ambassador and now as Lieutenant Governor, is pushing for smart policies that combat climate change and protect our water supply. Protecting the environment and growing businesses are not mutually exclusive. The Water Forum is proof. As one of the founding members of the Water Forum representing the housing industry, we showed that business and environmentalists can work together, relying on the best available science, to ensure a balanced approach to water management.

As we look to what the next 20-years will bring, we must not turn a blind eye to the impact of climate change, and we must come together once again to implement policies to combat these negative impacts on our environment.

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*Eleni Kounalakis,*  
*California Lieutenant Governor, U.S. Ambassador and Water Forum Agreement signatory for AKT Development*

## WATER CONSERVATION

The Agreement's Water Conservation Element helps meet the region's water supply needs by minimizing the need for increased groundwater pumping and increased use of surface water, including diversions from the American River. Each water supplier in the region committed to implementing comprehensive water conservation plans. And, Sacramento-area residents continue to demonstrate that they are willing to use water efficiently. During the drought, residents reached some of the highest conservation levels in the state. And over time, the region's water use has remained steady even as the area's population has increased.

## INCREASED SURFACE WATER DIVERSIONS

Increased diversions will be needed in the region even with active conservation programs and the recommended sustainable use of groundwater that are also part of the Water Forum Agreement. The Agreement outlines agreed-to diversions for each supplier and the facilities needed to divert, treat and distribute this water, and implement emergency flow strategies to minimize harm to salmon and steelhead trout. They also developed plans for reducing demand on the river by shifting to more groundwater and increasing water conservation.

## DRY YEAR ACTIONS

To avoid impacts to the lower American River during dry water years, water providers agreed to reduce their surface water diversions and use alternative supplies, such as groundwater, or increase conservation to meet customer needs. This element was tested and proven successful during California's most recent drought emergency. Working together through the Water Forum's Dry Year Conference, members worked with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation to develop and implement emergency flow strategies to minimize harm to salmon and steelhead. They also developed plans for reducing demand on the river by shifting to more groundwater and increasing water conservation.

“ In a state where there are constant disagreements and lawsuits about water, the Sacramento Water Forum has been a calming influence on our region, doing a good job of meeting local water needs and protecting the lower American River, which flows through the American River Parkway.

*Clyde Macdonald,  
participant in the Water Forum Agreement negotiations for the Sierra Club*

## WATER FORUM SUCCESSOR EFFORT

To make the Agreement work over time, stakeholders created a mechanism to maintain relationships and creatively resolve issues as they arise. The Water Forum Successor Effort (WFSE) is charged with implementing parts of the Water Forum Agreement and tracking the implementation of other parts. It provides a long-term framework for members and their representatives to address challenges that arise from new information and changed policy or regulatory conditions. This ongoing process is the hallmark of the Water Forum process and agreement — it allows immediate focus on new issues and provides the WFSE the flexibility to realign and the ability to sustain trust and momentum.





## BUILDING A BRIGHT FUTURE FOR THE NEXT 20 YEARS

As the Water Forum celebrates its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, members are embarking on a new strategic planning process to consider lessons learned over the past two decades and where the Water Forum should go from here, particularly in a future with climate change. The Water Forum Agreement is a living document—envisioned to adapt with changing conditions—yet ever focused on meeting the co-equal goals through collaboration.

Water Forum members have many accomplishments to celebrate after 20 years. Yet, there are challenges ahead. Working with our next generation of water managers, community representatives, environmental advocates and business leaders, Water Forum members will need to continue working together to balance the water needs of residents, businesses and wildlife while also considering the projected impacts of climate change and the interplay of sensitive communities. A fresh look at the Water Forum Agreement and the water needs of our community promises to keep our coalition engaged and provide the most meaningful focus for our efforts.

The diverse members of the Sacramento Water Forum each play a role in addressing these challenges. Through continued collaboration, we can manage and protect the lower American River to preserve the beauty, vital ecosystem and prosperity that it provides, now and for many generations to come.

“ Yes, the first 20 years have been an outstanding example of the benefits of open, transparent and inclusive collaboration. But the big test will be whether the current participants continue in that spirit or whether their organizations return to the tribalism found in too many California water disputes. Please, keep us proud of the work you do!

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*Jonas Minton,  
participant in the Water Forum Agreement negotiations,  
former Executive Director, the Water Forum*

# HONORS AND AWARDS

- 1999 Achievement Award from California Water Policy Conference
- 2000 Association of California Water Agencies Clair A. Hill Water Agency Award
- 2000 U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Region 9 Outstanding Environmental Achievement Award
- 2001 League of California Cities Helen Putnam Award for Excellence
- 2003 Governor's Environmental and Economic Leadership Award for outstanding contributions in the area of Environmental-Economic Partnerships
- 2004 Harvard University Kennedy School of Government "Top 50" Programs in the Innovations In American Government competition
- 2015 American Water Resources Association, Csallany Institutional Award for Exemplary Contributions to Water Resources Management
- 2015 Governor's Environmental and Economic Leadership Award



The Water Forum was honored in both 2003 and 2015 with the Governor's Environmental and Economic Leadership Award — the state's top award for environmental stewardship — in recognition of their work to improve the lower American River riparian habitat and parkway, and to protect the Sacramento region's water supply.

“Thirty years ago, improvements to our water conveyance infrastructure were at a standstill due to hopelessly deadlocked conflicting interest groups. Recognizing the legitimate concerns of all and the crucial importance of water supply to our region, the Water Forum was born.

A diverse group of business, agricultural, citizen group, environmental, water supply and local government leaders agreed to work together for the betterment of our water and ecosystem.

After several years of intense discussions with each interest group striving to understand the underlying interests of all while advocating for their own, this highly collaborative group jointly signed the historic Water Forum Agreement.

I was honored to have participated in this landmark project. Not only did I learn valuable collaborative skills that served me well in my political career, I also made many good friends from every interest group. I look forward to celebrating the 20-year anniversary of this proud accomplishment with an eye towards the future.

*Roger Niello,*

*Water Forum stakeholder and Agreement signatory as Sacramento County Supervisor*

# WATER FORUM MEMBERS

The Water Forum is at its essence a partnership among diverse interests, all working to achieve the co-equal goals. Thank you for your dedication and collaboration over the past 20 years.

## WATER PROVIDERS

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California American Water  
Carmichael Water District  
Citrus Heights Water District  
City of Folsom  
City of Roseville  
Clay Water District  
Del Paso Manor Water District  
El Dorado County Water Agency  
El Dorado Irrigation District  
Fair Oaks Water District  
Galt Irrigation District  
Georgetown Divide Public Utility District  
Golden State Water Company/  
Arden-Cordova Water Service  
Natomas Central Mutual Water Company  
Omochumne-Hartnell Water District  
Orange Vale Water Company  
Placer County Water Agency  
Rancho Murieta Community  
Services District  
Regional Water Authority  
Rio Linda/Elverta Community  
Water District  
Sacramento County Water Agency  
Sacramento County Farm Bureau  
Sacramento Suburban Water District  
San Juan Water District

## BUSINESS

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AKT Development Corp.  
Associated General Contractors of California  
North State Building Industry Association  
Sacramento Association of REALTORS  
Sacramento Metropolitan  
Chamber of Commerce  
Sacramento-Sierra Building  
& Construction Trades Council

## ENVIRONMENTAL

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Environmental Council of Sacramento  
Friends of the River  
Save the American River Association  
Sierra Club, Mother Lode Chapter

## PUBLIC

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City of Sacramento  
County of Sacramento  
League of Women Voters  
of Sacramento County  
Sacramento County Taxpayers League  
Sacramento Municipal Utility District

“ I may be the only person who autographed the Water Forum Agreement twice; once for California American Water Company, and, after changing positions, for Sacramento Suburban Water District. I'd sign it again if allowed the opportunity. Yes, it's that important.

*Rob Roscoe,*

*Water Forum Agreement signatory for Citizens Utilities Company of California (now California American Water Company),  
former General Manager, Sacramento Suburban Water District*

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The magic that birthed the original Water Forum Agreement was as simple as it was profound. Will and courage. The will and the courage to suspend one's own judgement long enough to truly enter the worldview of one's adversary....to place oneself into another's skin and shoes and repeat the question, WHY do you think that, with an open mind and heart. This magic of collaboration has firmly held the Water Forum together for 20 years. As the stakeholders work to extend the agreement, have the courage and the will. Here's to another 20 years! The Water Forum journey, hands down, was the most meaningful experience of my career.

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*Susan Sherry,  
Water Forum Agreement Mediator*



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