

Yurok Tribe signs historic MOU to help salmon

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The Yurok Tribe, CalTrout and Farmers Ditch Company recently signed an agreement that envisions a future where salmon populations and family farms both flourish in the Scott River Valley.

“The Yurok Tribe initiated this unique partnership in an effort to develop cooperative, mutually beneficial solutions that help the Scott River’s salmon runs recover,” said Yurok Tribal Council Member Ryan Ray. “We believe that strong fish runs and resilient ranching operations can coexist in the Scott River Valley. This agreement establishes the necessary framework to make it happen.”

The primary objectives of the partnership are to restore salmon habitat and improve on-farm water use efficiency. According to the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), the unconventional group of stakeholders agreed to pursue collaborative projects “that provide landscape-scale benefits for fish and wildlife and farms.” On June 15, representatives from the Yurok Tribe, CalTrout and Farmers Ditch Company convened at the Scott River Ranch to sign the MOU and share a celebratory meal of salmon and organic beef raised in the Scott Valley.

“I’m excited to be part of making history instead of being swept away by it. This is an exceptional opportunity to sculpt a positive outcome for both the environment and the people that live within it,” said rancher Gareth Plank, the host of the dinner, a member of Farmers Ditch Company, and the owner of the certified organic Scott River Ranch.

“We all rely on water – including our fish – and my team is excited to be a member of this innovative partnership working toward a future for water security and functioning ecosystems.

This could be a real win-win for fish, farms, and California’s Tribal communities,” said CalTrout’s Mount Shasta-Klamath Regional Director Damon Goodman.

Farmers Ditch Company provides water to 1,028 acres of family-owned farmland adjacent to the Scott River.

The Scott is one of the largest Klamath River tributaries and is the most productive coho salmon stream in not only the Klamath Basin, but all of California. It also supports Chinook salmon, steelhead and Pacific lamprey, all of which the Yurok Tribe depends on for sustenance and ceremony. In recent years, fish numbers have declined on the Scott, due in large part to the extended drought, a legacy environmental damage leftover from the gold mining era and disease outbreaks in the main-stem Klamath.

The Tribe, CalTrout and Farmers Ditch Company, in partnership with the Karuk Tribe and others, are currently developing plans for a sizeable project on the Scott.

Based on local landowner feedback, the Scott River Tailings Reach Watershed Restoration Project will relocate or modify Farmers Ditch Company’s point of diversion, which will increase flows for juvenile and adult salmon. The project will also restore degraded fish habitat and improve fish passage within a section of the river.

In the mid-1900s, a steam dredge left sprawling piles of rock in and along several miles of the Scott near Callahan. The mine tailings prevent fish from entering a key tributary, Sugar Creek, and result in a dry streambed in the summer, a critical time for juvenile salmon.

The restoration work will aim to improve year-round flow and provide access to Sugar Creek as well as new habitats within part of the mine tailings reach.

The \$7 million Scott River Tailings Reach Watershed Restoration Project is funded by California Department of Fish and Wildlife. Brought together by the devastating impact of the extended drought, the Yurok and Karuk Tribes, CalTrout, Scott River Water Trust, Farmers Ditch Company, and other partners will be working cooperatively on the project. The Yurok Fisheries Department, Yurok Tribe Construction Corporation and the Karuk Tribe will perform the restoration components.

The habitat and water system improvements will complement ongoing efforts by CalTrout and others to restore the Scott River – including the upstream tributaries - East Fork and South Fork Scott River.

“I hope this work will one day serve as a model that can be duplicated from the Klamath River’s headwaters to the coast,” concluded Yurok Vice Chairman Frankie Myers.

