

Uneventful Spring Stream Flows; Monitoring and Restoration Continue

by Greg Reis

Spring is one of the most exciting times of year for the Mono Basin creeks. Plants and trees begin growing, snowmelt engorges the channels, and nesting birds return to the riparian canopy. Following are reports on some of the aspects of stream restoration.

Stream Flows

Los Angeles Department of Water and Power predicts runoff to be 81.7% of average for the 2002 runoff year. This “dry-normal” runoff year will result in little change in lake level as well as low stream flows. Thanks to a stormy spring, this is an improvement from the April 1 forecast of only 75% of average runoff.

Restoration Work

The Rush Creek return ditch won't be ready for higher flows until 2003, limiting this year's peak flow to 160

cubic feet per second (cfs). This is 90 cfs short of the Water Board-ordered stream restoration flow of 250 cfs for this year. In the fall, a barren portion of Rush Creek's floodplain that was filled with gravel in a 1967 flood will be lowered to a level that will allow the creek to actively flood there again. Also, the entrance to “Channel 8” in the bottomlands will be lowered to allow easier access to high flows. Tamarisk removal and a pilot planting of pines along Rush Creek occurred in May.

Monitoring

Stream monitoring efforts will continue. Specific activities include fish population surveying, channel morphology monitoring, and processing of vegetation data collected last year. The fish monitoring has shown as-yet-unexplained high mortality of 2–3-year-

old fish. The Mono Lake Committee will continue to monitor groundwater levels for the 8th season in a row. See www.monolake.org/restoration/ for more details.

Lee Vining Creek Trail Update

The plan for reconstruction of the Lee Vining Creek trailhead, which was temporarily rerouted during highway construction, is to have the trail switchback down the slope near the north end of the retaining wall. Caltrans has agreed to construct the trail if the Forest Service maintains it. After additional public comment the change order will go to the contractor, and the trail should be open by September, when the highway work is scheduled to be finished. ❖



Dry Years a Mixed Bag

by Greg Reis

Conventional wisdom says that dry years are bad and wet years are good. With natural systems, however, there is no “good” or “bad,” just a range of natural variation. Sustainable water use should fit into this range of natural variation without stressing ecosystems or endangering water supplies in dry years.

Unfortunately, when we remove a significant amount of water from rivers, lakes, and streams,

we make normal years into dry years, and the frequency and severity of dry years are often pushed beyond the range of natural variation. In the case of Mono Lake, it is recovering from an artificial 50-year severe drought, and therefore naturally dry years significantly slow its recovery. The lake level drops, dust storms get worse, and the partial landbridge between Negit and the mainland grows disconcertingly larger. The lake level dropped one foot since this time last year to 6382.8 feet above sea level, and it will probably drop slightly this year too.

Dry years aren't entirely bad, however. Endangered bighorn sheep benefit from a light snowpack and abundant winter forage. In its current meromictic

state (see Winter 1997 *Newsletter*), Mono Lake increases in productivity. In fact, if current trends continue, scientist Bob Jellison predicts meromixis will break down in the fall of 2004 (and will be stinkier than the last time due to higher levels of ammonium). And perhaps most importantly of all, water users are reminded that our water supplies fluctuate and plans must be made for inevitable dry years. I hope that if we work to sustainably manage our water resources, someday the response to an announcement of a dry year will be, “No problem!” ❖

Greg Reis is the Committee's Information Specialist. In April he rode his bicycle from Lee Vining to a restoration meeting in Sacramento.

6417'

6392'

6383'

6372'

Prediversion lake level, 1941

Future lake level (average)

Current lake level

Historic low, 1982