

Winters project restoring Putah Creek's natural flow

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There was a time when Putah Creek ran wild near Winters, when salmon laid their eggs in sun-dappled riffles and rainbow trout lurked in dark pools, waiting for insects to drop from the overhanging alder branches.

Today, in a one-mile stretch of the creek that flows past the small town, those times are a distant blur. The stream is wide, warm and green with stagnation.

Decades of gravel mining, dam building and the spread of invasive plant species have ravaged the creek. Erosion cut steep cliffs. Himalayan blackberry covered its banks. Salmon disappeared.

"Nature would eventually correct this, but it might take 1,000 years," said Rich Marovich, streamkeeper with the Lower Putah Creek Coordinating Committee.

Marovich hopes to undo many of the changes of the past 150 years in nine months. Crews began work in the past two weeks on a \$2.25 million project to restore Putah Creek through Winters as a city park.

Working with teams of construction workers and volunteers, Marovich is on a push to narrow the stream's channel by November and replant its banks with native vegetation by spring. Planners say the project will create a cold, fresh habitat for trout and spawning salmon and a welcoming environment for walkers.

They're hoping to bring back mink, Anna's hummingbirds, southwestern pond turtles, California quail and other species native to the area near Winters.

The work will proceed in stages.

On Thursday, yellow excavators ripped out streamside vegetation as workers readied an industrial-size shredder. Stretches of black plastic pipe, 2 feet in diameter and as long as a football field, lay in a great mound above the creek bed. Workers will lay the pipe down the middle of the channel for about a mile and divert the water flow into it.

Then the banks will be reshaped into a wide V with a narrow channel at the bottom. It's a more natural formation than the broad, steep-sided creek that exists now.

Under the historic railroad bridge in Winters, used by bikers and pedestrians, the channel will go from about 90 feet wide to 30 feet wide, Marovich said.

"What you see here is the antithesis of salmon habitat," he said. "It's wide. It's slow. No gravel at all."

The changes will allow for walking trails, gravelly beaches and the growth of native trees – mainly alders, willows and cottonwoods. They will overhang the water, dropping insects for fish food and casting shadows.

Shaded and narrowed, the stream will be colder and faster. Gravel will be transported downstream, creating riffles where chinook salmon can lay their eggs.

Gravel mining from the late 1800s to the 1970s depleted the natural material from the streambed. Monticello

Dam, which created Lake Berryessa, holds back tons of gravel that would otherwise travel downstream.

Putah Creek is "a creek that's starved for gravels," said Libby Earthman, executive director of the nonprofit environmental group Putah Creek Council.

"A stream naturally has a sequence of pools, riffles and runs," Marovich said. "On Putah Creek we don't see that natural form."

The creek flows from Lake Berryessa to the Yolo Bypass through a checkerboard of farms and ranches, passing the University of California, Davis, on the way. It forms much of the border of Yolo and Solano counties.

John Fogerty of Creedence Clearwater Revival immortalized the creek in the song "Green River."

His brother and bandmate, Tom Fogerty, said in an interview that their family stayed in a cabin by Putah Creek when they were young, and that many of the images in the song – dragonflies, bullfrogs, skipping stones – were taken from their memories there.

"I can hear the bullfrog callin' me," the lyrics say. "Wonder if my rope's still hangin' to the tree."

Since drought years dried up the stream in the 1990s, environmentalists have been trying to return it to a more natural and bucolic state. More than a dozen projects have been undertaken on the creek in the past 10 years at a total cost of about \$10 million, Marovich said.

The Winters Putah Creek Park project is by far the largest. It's being paid for mainly with funding from the state Natural Resources Agency's California River Parkways program.

Dozens of other potential projects, including many on private land, have been identified along a 30-mile stretch of Putah Creek, Marovich said.

The Winters plan hasn't been without controversy.

In the summer of 2009, some residents protested the demolition of a concrete dam at a popular swimming hole near the town's center. The demolition went ahead that October.

Marovich said the reshaping of the streambed will create greater access for recreational users – swimmers, hikers, and fishermen – who now must scramble down steep embankments and brave tangles of blackberry thorns.

"The greater opportunities are hard for people to imagine," he said. "It will only get more pretty from here."