

# SOUTH YUBA RIVER CITIZENS LEAGUE



## — SYRCL I M P A C T R E P O R T — 2 0 2 3





Image: Lazy Fox Photography





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*\*\*cover photo Lazy Fox Photography*

Image: Lazy Fox Photography



# A LETTER FROM SYRCL'S EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

SYRCL was founded as a grassroots movement which believed that people can save a river. As I reflect on the past year, I am confident that we have lived up to that premise. As you'll see in the following pages, we are working hard every day to protect and restore the Yuba River watershed through advocacy, science, education, and outreach.

2023 was a year of transition for me at SYRCL. I took over as Interim Executive Director right after the Wild & Scenic Film Fest 2023, officially stepping into the role that summer. Reflecting on my first year leading SYRCL, I am struck by the breadth of ways we work to protect, inspire, and advocate for the health and resilience of the place we love and all living things that dwell here.

As with all tasks this large, we cannot do it alone. The help of supporters like you empowers us to do this work. Over 1,000 volunteers have stepped in and stepped up to help us care for the river, educate students and visitors, and inspire thousands at the Wild and Scenic Film Festival. They motivate us all to become better stewards of our watershed. The 3,500 individuals who make up SYRCL's membership provide essential support for our teams. With the financial backing of our members, we continue to be able to develop innovative projects to preserve and restore the Yuba, whether that is working to restore salmon habitat, creating more resilient meadows and forests, or working with policy makers advocating for environmental protection.

Last year was a year of climate extremes. Water Year 2023 began as the third year of a deep drought, but weather whiplash quickly took hold and, by April 1st, the Sierra snow pack was 230% of average. We know that weather extremes like this will only become worse with global climate change. In the face of the changing climate, our work to help (re)build the resilience of this place to a changing climate is more critical than ever.



We are dedicated to expanding the impact we have throughout the watershed, meeting the challenge of climate change. And we are effective because of your generosity and support. It is our hope that this report highlights the accomplishments we made with your help in 2023 and points to a future that is sustainable for humans and the environment alike.

For the Yuba!



Aaron Zettler-Mann



## LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

SYRCL works throughout the Yuba River watershed on the Ancestral and Traditional homelands of the Nisenan Tribe and includes shared boundaries with the Mountain Maidu, Konkow, and Washoe peoples. These Tribes have lived here for millennia and live here still.

We acknowledge and mourn the painful history of genocide and the devastation of lands and waters irreversibly altered. We are grateful for opportunities to partner with the Tribes to create a shared vision and rebalance our relationship to this place.







# BECAUSE OF YOUR SUPPORT WE WERE ABLE TO



## EDUCATE

over 4,600 students  
from 25 Title I schools  
in California



## UNITE

over 700 volunteers to  
remove more than 12,000  
pounds of trash from 70+  
miles of river



## RESTORE

714 acres of meadow, a  
planned 275,000 acres of  
forest, and 171 acres of  
floodplain riparian areas



## ADVOCATE

for Chinook salmon,  
steelhead trout, and green  
sturgeon through public  
process and litigation



## INSPIRE

55,000 people with over  
160 environmental and  
adventure films in dozens  
of states across the US



# Justice, Equity, Diversity, & Inclusion

In support of SYRCL's mission "to unite the community to protect and restore the Yuba River watershed," we envision justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI) as core values and key principles influencing SYRCL's entire operation and community going forward.

SYRCL recognizes the inherent link between racial and environmental justice and strives to work toward both. We commit to learn and grow in our understanding of the systemic nature of white supremacy culture so that we may advocate for systemic changes to discover, honor, and incorporate the diverse perspectives and knowledge of all people, especially BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and differently-abled communities within the Yuba watershed.

Through this lens and our work, we seek to strengthen SYRCL's vision of "a vibrant, science-based community organization that serves as a leader for environmental stewardship and activism in the Yuba River watershed."



# Milestones for 2023

- Coordinated a full-day, SYRCL board and organization wide, in-person, JEDI-focused workshop and discussion.
- Coordinated staff-wide training on Dismantling Institutional Racism in Nonprofits.
- Increased SYRCL's monthly ongoing contributions to the California Heritage Indigenous Research Project (CHIRP's) Reciprocity Program.
- Participated in Hospitality House's Cleanup.
- Provided Spanish language outreach material and recruited Spanish-speaking River Captains and volunteer River Ambassadors to staff summer outreach booths.
- Through the Wild & Scenic Film Festival, continued to amplify voices often marginalized by traditional media. This included curating film programming that highlighted stories from a diverse array of locations and cultures from around the globe, as well as non-film programming.
- Started a collaboration between SYRCL and the coordinator of the Nevada County Partners Family Resource Centers and Community School Strategies to host informational events for the Latinx community.
- Continued our partnership with Earthwatch Institute's Girls in Science Program and brought 15 students from the greater Los Angeles area, Bay Area, and Central Valley to work with SYRCL staff on data collection, which supports meadow restoration projects.
- Secured funding for a crew from United Auburn Indian Community (UAIC) to work with SwiftWater Designs to learn how to build beaver dam analogs (BDAs) & post-assisted log structures (PALS) as part of the Haskell peak Meadows Restoration Project.









Image: Shelley Carlisle



# ADVOCACY

Our advocacy team continued to give voice and agency to the river, the watershed, and its inhabitants through the use of hard scientific evidence to fight for their survival.

This work, integral to SYRCL in its formative years, continues today as we engage meaningfully in community issues, call the community to action, coordinate with coalition partners to broaden and enhance impact, track policy, attend hearings and meetings, and urge local, state, and federal officials to do what's best for our community and our watershed.

## OUR INITIATIVES INCLUDE:

**Yuba Salmon Now** - SYRCL worked closely with NGO and agency partners to advance our ambitious vision of a healthy salmon population that can swim freely from summit to sea. We monitored happenings at the local, state, and federal levels for potential direct impacts to Yuba salmon. SYRCL advocated for Yuba salmon in the Bay-Delta Plan, urging the State Water Resources Control Board to let salmon swim and release more freshwater river flow to the Golden Gate. Whether it be calling attention to the potential impacts of a proposed local project or advancing efforts that increase available habitat or improve fish passage on the lower Yuba River, SYRCL continued to use its voice to advocate for the Yuba.

**Growing Green for the Yuba** - SYRCL engaged in policy discussions surrounding Nevada County's cannabis cultivation ordinance, including providing written and public comments at Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors meetings. SYRCL tracked state-level efforts to support equity and environmental practices in the cannabis industry. SYRCL also continued to advance education and outreach through the facilitation of in-person workshops and participation in educational events hosted by Nevada County Cannabis Alliance, Nevada County, and UC Berkeley Cannabis Research Center. We also actively sought new funding opportunities to support and expand our work, particularly in support of our cannabis water quality study protocol and our work on best management practices for sustainable cannabis cultivation in Nevada County.

**Stop Centennial Dam** – Using public engagement and comment opportunities, SYRCL, the Foothills Water Network (FWN), and community driven Dam Watchdogs continued to voice opposition to the proposed Centennial Dam and engaged in NID’s “Plan for Water” process which will impact how NID manages water over the next 50 years. SYRCL continued to advocate for a sustainable water future and lent technical expertise to NID and partners during this critical process. Through our Dam Watchdog listserv, we provided timely updates to inform the public on the Plan for Water developments and called the community to action when needed.

**Dams and Hydropower Reform** – SYRCL and non-governmental organization (NGO) partners filed numerous comments on ongoing hydropower relicensing issues that impact salmon and fisheries in the Yuba watershed, including relicensing of the Narrows 1 Project, and tracking the FERC appeal in the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit.



Image: Bob Free

**Environmental Action** - SYRCL continued to formally oppose the re-opening of the Idaho-Maryland Mine by delivering over 1,000 petition signatures to the Board of Supervisors, submitting comments on the Final Environmental Impact Report and working with coalition partners in matters of advocacy, policy, and education.





# MEADOW RESTORATION

Meadows are key to a healthy watershed because they provide critical habitat for many species of mammals, birds, fish, and amphibians, have high carbon storage capacity, and contribute to downstream water quality and late season flows.

Unfortunately, of the 200,000 acres of meadows in the Sierra Nevada, approximately 70% are in a degraded state. SYRCL works to restore headwater meadows to enhance the potential ecosystem services they provide.

**Van Norden Meadow:** In 2023, SYRCL and partners completed the first full year of post-restoration monitoring, documenting restoration success and completing adaptive management restoration actions where needed. Follow-up beaver dam analogs were installed in Castle Creek and tree removal of encroaching conifers continued in 2023. SYRCL also secured \$2.7 million in funding from CA Department of Fish & Wildlife and the Martis Fund to support implementation of Phase 2 of the project in 2024.

**Haskell Peak Five Meadow Complex:** SYRCL and partners implemented 229 acres of restoration in five meadows in the North Yuba watershed using low-impact, process-based restoration techniques such as beaver dam analogs. In 2023, a total of 328 beaver dam analog, post-assisted log structures, and head cut repair structures were built in the five project meadows.

## Castle Valley & Round Valley:

- **Trailhead:** SYRCL and partners completed concept designs and held a public outreach meeting to kick off the development of a trailhead to improve access to the Castle Peak trail while reducing environmental degradation associated with the lack of formal trailhead facilities at this popular site.
- **Meadow Restoration:** SYRCL also submitted a grant to pursue the planning phase of a meadow restoration project at Castle and Round Valley.



# FOREST CONSERVATION

SYRCL made excellent strides on a variety of local and regional forest health initiatives in 2023, building on existing projects while exploring new opportunities in forest restoration throughout the Yuba River watershed. We continue to deepen our collaborative relationships with local and regional organizations working to restore forest health and protect our forests and communities from natural disturbance, disruptive forest management, and the threats of climate change. SYRCL plays a pivotal role in facilitating regional collaboratives, creating and sharing educational resources, and assessing and planning on-the-ground forest restoration across the watershed.

**North Yuba Forest Partnership** – SYRCL helped lead the US Forest Service and the North Yuba Forest Partnership through several important milestones for forest restoration on the North Yuba in 2023. Formal environmental review for the North Yuba Landscape Resilience Project—a project covering 275,000 acres of restoration work across the Tahoe National Forest—was completed in July 2023 with the signing of the Record of Decision for treatment on the landscape. SYRCL facilitated communications and collaboration of the North Yuba Partnership through this monumental milestone, including leading the annual North Yuba Forest Partnership field tour and managing multiple Partnership committees through this process. The Record of Decision allows for forest treatments to begin on the North Yuba Landscape, with the first project area located around the community of Downieville and forest thinning scheduled to begin in the summer of 2024.

**Yuba Forest Network** – 2023 ushered in the first in-person meetings for the Yuba Forest Network. These meetings convened dozens of diverse stakeholders throughout the Yuba and Bear River watersheds to share state-wide resources, regional project updates, and networking. The Stakeholder Mapping Tool, a resource used by stakeholders to write grants, and plan aligned projects with a unified and regionally specific approach to forest restoration, was updated by SYRCL staff and key YFN members. SYRCL Staff connected with other landscape stewardship networks on both the statewide and national level through the National Landscape Conservation Network's Catalyst Fund Retreat.

**Invasive Weeds** – SYRCL worked with the US Forest Service and National Forest Foundation for the seventh year in a row to hire a seasonal hand crew to assist the Tahoe National Forest West Zone botany crew in invasive weed removal efforts on the Yuba and American River Ranger Districts. The three-person crew primarily worked on mapping, monitoring, and manually removing target species including scotch broom, yellow star-thistle, spotted knapweed, and grasses such as medusahead and barbed goatgrass. The crew covered over 20-acres of infestation sites, removing over 50,000 plants by hand-pulling, weed-whacking and wrenching, plus flagging and monitoring an additional 73-acres for future treatments. The crew also assisted the Tahoe’s crew in surveying for rare plants across the American River Ranger District, in efforts to best manage for these species in the future.

**Aspen** – SYRCL staff created an aspen restoration prioritization tool utilizing survey data collected in 2021-2022. Using results from the prioritization tool, SYRCL staff assessed and selected over 150-acres of aspen stands as new sites for restoration treatment. SYRCL partnered with the Western Aspen Alliance and USFS to host the Central Sierra Western Slope Aspen Workshop in the North Yuba. This workshop brought together researchers and practitioners to discuss the unique ecology and management conditions of aspen within our watershed.





# RIVER MONITORING

2023 marked twenty-three years of continuous river monitoring and volunteer-based community science.

In April 2023, we presented/shared SYRCL's River Monitoring community science water quality program at the regional Waterkeeper summit, held in Boise, Idaho. It focused on sharing knowledge and resources concerning water resource issues and grassroots efforts to steward and protect waterways for health and recreation.



**Emerging Contaminants** — PFAS chemicals, also known as “forever chemicals,” possess the quality of remaining in the environment and organisms indefinitely without breaking down. In 2022, SYRCL sampled for PFAS chemicals in the South Yuba and results showed PFAS levels below detectable limits. In order to further investigate these contaminants impacts on the Yuba, SYRCL sought out and successfully secured funding in 2023. Over the next few years, SYRCL will collect samples for laboratory analysis to ensure our rivers remain healthy and safe for recreation.

## ACHIEVEMENTS

- 415 total community scientists trained since 2000.
- Approximately 105,000 recorded water quality measurements.
- Over 30,600 volunteer hours donated.
- 97% of all data passed precision and accuracy standards

A person wearing a grey hoodie and a light-colored cap is fishing in a river. The river flows over rocks, creating small rapids. The background is filled with lush green trees and foliage. A large, dark green, rounded rectangular text box is overlaid on the left side of the image.

# RIVER RESTORATION

The Yuba River once supported a thriving ecosystem with an abundant fish population and habitat for wildlife, but the ongoing impacts of legacy mining and dam construction have caused fish populations in the lower Yuba River to decline precipitously. These declines are exacerbated by frequent drought conditions made worse by climate change. Our work helps to restore habitat so these populations can recover.

**Lower Long Bar** – 2023 kicked off the first year of post-project monitoring after construction was completed in November 2022. This project created 42 acres of floodplain, side-channel, and backwater habitat for juvenile Chinook salmon and steelhead trout. In total, over 350,000 cubic yards of hydraulic mining debris were removed, returning the floodplain to where the water is to allow more space for the river. Data collected from snorkel surveys, benthic macroinvertebrate sampling, and vegetation recruitment surveys will tell us more about the habitat benefits this restoration project brought to native species.

**Upper Long Bar** – SYRCL is working with project partners to design restoration plans to enhance an additional 50 estimated acres of juvenile salmonid habitat on the upper portion of Long Bar. Planning, design, and pre-project monitoring are well underway and are on track for implementation in 2025.

**Hallwood** – As a vital project partner, SYRCL supported implementation of the fourth and final phase of this historic floodplain and side channel restoration project. In 2023, SYRCL helped oversee the planting of 5,616 willow and cottonwood stakes across 13 acres of off-channel habitat. This will help jump start primary productivity and support a healthy food web for rearing salmonids.

**Rose Bar** – This project aims to enhance two existing riffles below Englebright dam to create spawning habitat for adult Chinook salmon and steelhead. Phase 1 of implementation was completed in 2023, which constructed an access road, generated 70,000 tons of spawning gravel, and planted 566 trees with the help of volunteers. Spawning riffles will be augmented with this gravel in Phase 2, anticipated for construction in Summer 2024.





# RIVER EDUCATION

Our River Education program creates lifelong stewards of the Yuba River watershed by providing educational opportunities for kindergarteners through adults. Thanks to the support of foundations, grantors, and donors, thousands of students and community members join us each year to learn about our watershed and its wonders.

**Field Science** – In 2023, SYRCL hosted 2 Earthwatch Institute Girls In Science high school field science expeditions in the montane meadows near the headwaters of the Yuba River. 14 students from throughout California and 1 student from Portland, participated in the 8-day expeditions and worked along SYRCL scientists and educators with monitoring and restoration work in Van Norden Meadow. Monitoring activities included collecting groundwater data, bird surveys, amphibian and benthic macroinvertebrate surveys, and vegetation surveys. Restoration tasks included building willow fascines & removing fencing around groundwater wells.

**Wild & Scenic Film Festival School Programs** – The School Programs were back at Del Oro Theater in 2023. 2,497 kindergarten through 8th grade students attended a program at Del Oro Theater. 550 high school students participated in the program at Nevada Union's Don Baggett Theater. 252 students viewed the films during a school assembly hosted by a SYRCL Educator. Our education programming exposed 3,299 students and teachers from 19 schools to contemporary environmental issues through films and accompanying curriculum.

**Salmon Expeditions** – The 2023 Salmon Expedition season was SYRCL's largest season yet! Participating 3rd–5th grade students received a pre- and post-field trip lesson in their classrooms. SYRCL hosted 61 classes and 2 public community trips. 2,034 students, teachers, and community members floated down the lower Yuba River to witness spawning salmon and to learn about SYRCL's restoration work and the lasting impacts of the Gold Rush on the ecosystem and Nisenan tribe.

**High School Water Quality Project** – SYRCL expanded the pilot program to engage high school students from Bitney Prep and Downieville Jr./Sr. School through river monitoring. 30 students learned how to collect water quality samples to assess the health of local streams. Participating students created a PSA centered around river and watershed stewardship.

- **Awarded the Environmentalist of the Year Scholarship to Owen Papegay from Sierra Academy of Expeditionary Learning (SAEL)**
- **Reached over 4,600 students with our programs**
- **Connected with 25 Title I Schools**



# RIVER VOLUNTEERS

**River Ambassadors** – The 2023 River Ambassador season ran from May 26 to September 4th. 68 River Ambassadors counted nearly 19,000 visitors at Bridgeport, Highway 49, and Purdon Crossings while engaging in meaningful conversations about river safety and etiquette with nearly 3,000 visitors. The addition of a bilingual River Captain increased the program’s outreach opportunities. In 2023, River Ambassadors removed more than 3,500 pieces of garbage and 519 pieces of recycling, along with over 400 pieces of glass, 267 piles of dog waste, and 411 cigarette butts. In addition, they counted 1,101 dogs visiting the river the summer of 2023.



**Yuba River Cleanup** – The 26th Annual Yuba River Cleanup took place on Saturday, September 23rd, with self-guided cleanups available Sunday, September 24th – Wednesday, September 27 at 30 total sites throughout the watershed. Over 700 volunteers contributed over 2,100 hours to fill 260 trash bags and remove 12,364 pounds of trash and recycling from the watershed. After the Cleanup, volunteers gathered at Pioneer Park for music, speeches, food, drinks, and fun.

# SYRCL's WILD & SCENIC<sup>®</sup> FILM FESTIVAL

where activism gets inspired

SYRCL's Wild & Scenic Film Festival is one of the nation's premier environmental and adventure film festivals and has been inspiring activism and environmental stewardship since 2003. It's also SYRCL's largest annual fundraiser, drawing thousands of attendees, filmmakers, activists, athletes, and artists to the Sierra Nevada foothills annually.



Image: Allison Kalt



Image: John Boyle

After two decades occurring in January, the 2023 Wild & Scenic Film Festival was held for the first time in February. Following two years of only virtual screenings, the 21st annual festival returned to be in person in its traditional 5-day format from February 16-20th while still having a virtual component, which ran from February 19-26th. The year's central theme was CommUNITY; the programmed films, art exhibitions, and talks reflected the importance of working together to improve the environment and ignite the necessary social changes to make this planet more equal and just for all.

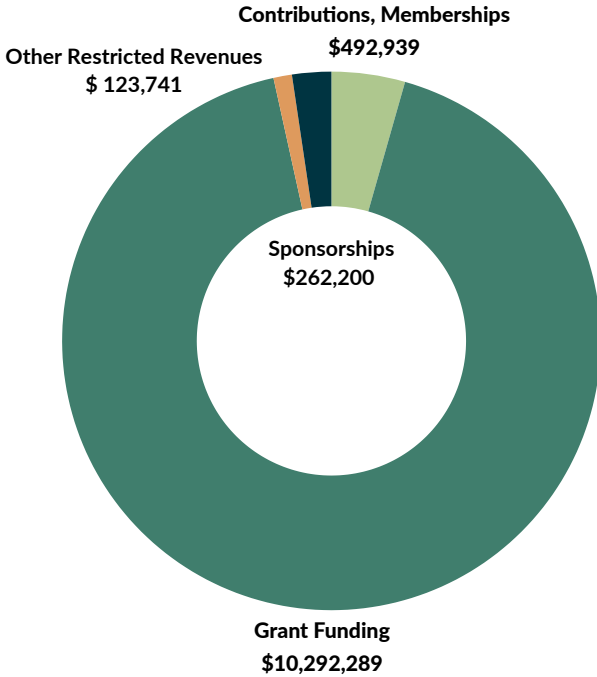
The festival hosted 80 special guests, including filmmakers, jury members, and speakers. It also gathered approximately 400 volunteers. Approximately 3,000 people participated in the film festival, and more than 3,000 kids engaged in the school programs offered during and post-event.

Following the flagship event, Wild & Scenic takes the festival on tour, bringing a selection of films to hundreds of organizations around the country and helping these like-minded groups to raise support and awareness of their mission while inspiring activism in their community and increasing the environmental groundswell near and far.



# FINANCIALS

SYRCL has a diversified funding stream composed of unrestricted contributions, memberships, gifts, program service revenue, sponsorships, special event ticketing, donated goods and services, and grants from foundations, corporations, as well as local, state, and federal agencies.

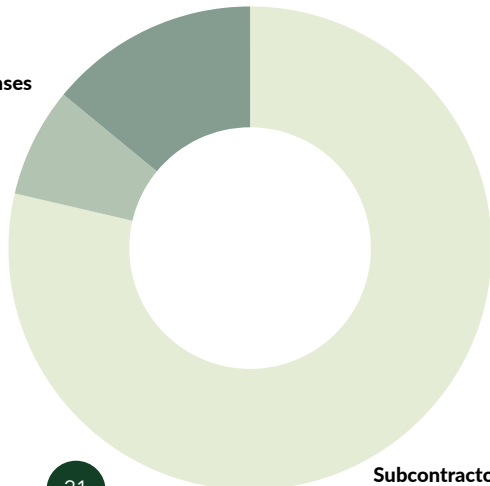


**FY 22/23  
Total Income  
\$11,553,215**



Payroll & Employee Expenses  
\$1,626,007

Program Expenses  
\$848,092



**FY 22/23  
Total Expenses  
\$11,580,486**

The incredible results detailed in this impact report were achievable because of our community. Gifts at all levels from individuals and local businesses were leveraged into significant wins for our watershed and advanced long-term initiatives which will help us confront climate change and create a sustainable water future.

SYRCL has been very successful in partnering with a variety of agencies to secure grant funding for our large-scale restoration projects and 2023 was a big implementation year. In addition to supporting our restoration, outreach, education, and advocacy, this grant funding contributes to the development of a local restoration economy by creating sustainable jobs which help protect our river, meadows, and forests.

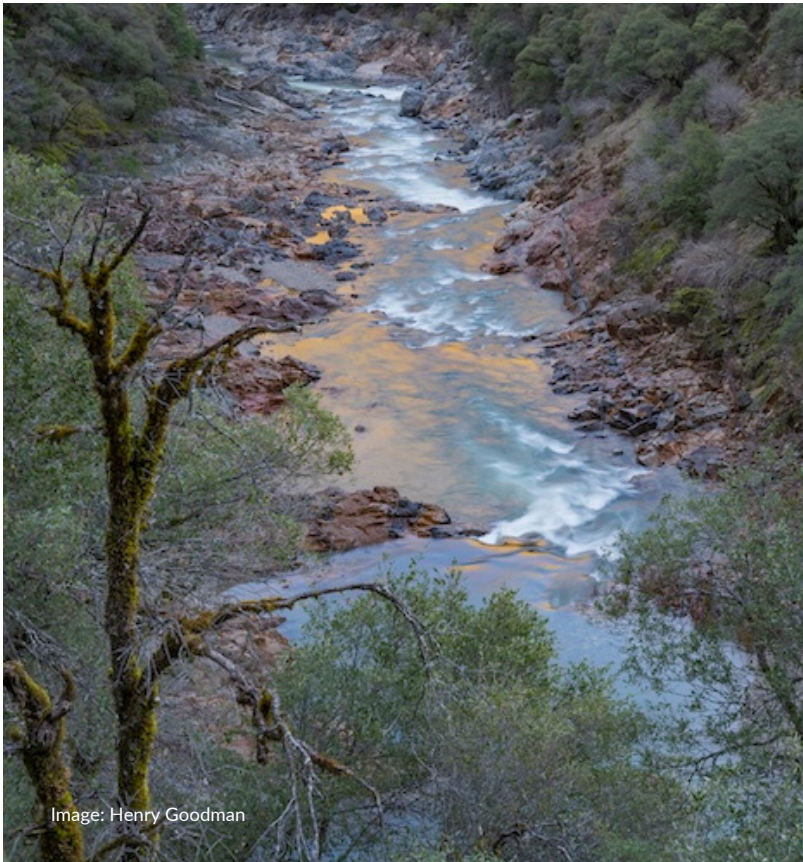


Image: Henry Goodman



# THANK YOU

## FOUNDATIONS

- Ann and Gordon Getty Foundation
- Bella Vista Foundation
- California State Parks Foundation
- California Hydropower Reform Coalition
- The Keith Campbell Foundation for the Environment
- The Latrobe Fund
- Marin Community Foundation
- Martis Fund
- National Environmental Education Foundation
- National Fish and Wildlife Foundation
- National Forest Foundation
- Resources Legacy Fund
- The San Francisco Foundation in honor of Justice William Newsom
- Tahoe Truckee Community Foundation
- Teichert Foundation

And all our  
sponsors,  
members,  
and donors

## AGENCIES

- California Department of Conservation
- California Department of Fish and Wildlife
- California Department of Water Resources
- Nevada County
- Placer County
- Sierra Meadows Partnership
- Sierra Nevada Conservancy
- US Bureau of Reclamation
- US Fish and Wildlife Service
- US Forest Service
- Wildlife Conservation Board
- Yuba Water Agency



Image: Lazy Fox Photography



# PLANNED GIVING

## Create a Lasting Impact for the Yuba Watershed

Your legacy matters. By including SYRCL in your will or estate plan, you're making a powerful statement of support for the Yuba River. This enduring commitment ensures that the watershed you cherish remains protected for generations to come.

**Legacy Gifts:** These extraordinary contributions are made through wills, trusts, IRAs, retirement plans, and life insurance. The best part? They don't impact your current finances. Legacy gifts sustain SYRCL's vital work over the long term.

**Tax Benefits:** Depending on your unique circumstances, a legacy gift may also offer tax advantages. We recommend consulting a tax professional to explore these potential benefits.

As weather patterns shift and political winds change, the Yuba River will continue to face ongoing threats. Your legacy gift becomes a beacon of hope, an extremely personal and generous safeguard for the Yuba's future.

Remember, planned giving doesn't have to be daunting. It's a beautiful way to leave a positive impact for the river, forest, meadows, and streams you love.

Contact Julie Pokrandt, Development Director:

**[Julie@yubariver.org](mailto:Julie@yubariver.org) or (530) 265-5961 x214**





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Image: Lazy Fox Photography