

Landowners volunteering for new conservation program in Lower Mokelumne River Watershed

A lovely ecosystem known as the riparian forest is vanishing from much of California. So it's welcome news that winegrape growers and other farmers and ranchers are volunteering to restore and conserve these shaded river corridors and their rich wildlife, fish, and songbird communities. Along the Lower Mokelumne River, the Lodi-Woodbridge Winegrape Commission, Lange Twins Wine Estates, Inc., East Bay Municipal Utility District, and other landowners are working with the California Association of Resource Conservation Districts, using an innovative conservation program, Safe Harbor. The Association administers the new Lower Mokelumne Watershed Safe Harbor Agreement, California's first multi-landowner or "programmatic" Safe Harbor, which is overseen by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Winegrape grower Lange Twins Wine Estates, Inc. is the first landowner to enroll.

California lost over 90% of its riparian forests by the end of the 20th century. As the dense vegetation yielded to urban and agricultural development, wildlife, salmon, other fish, and songbirds also declined. Some species have become so rare as to need protection under the Endangered Species Act, including a colorful insect known as the Valley elderberry longhorn beetle. Yet the remaining remnants of riparian habitat still support more than 200 species of birds and 40 species of mammals, showing how vibrant a restored river corridor could become.

All these animals are likely to find a more secure home along the Lower Mokelumne under the new program. Like all Safe Harbor Agreements, it encourages landowners to volunteer to restore and enhance wildlife habitat on their property without the fear of being burdened with new



River Partners

Riparian forest habitat

Endangered Species Act restrictions. In return for their beneficial stewardship, landowners receive legal assurances their good deeds will not result in new property restrictions and that they may continue normal business operations.

Landowners along a 40-mile stretch of the Lower Mokelumne River are eligible to enroll a total of almost 15,000 acres. Once enrolled, these landowners will plant and maintain elderberry bushes and restore native species typical of Valley Foothill Riparian habitats. Elderberry bushes are an important component of the riparian forest understory and the sole food source and shelter for the federally threatened Valley elderberry longhorn beetle. Neotropical migrant songbirds, resident songbirds, raptors, and several mammal species also will benefit from restored Valley Foothill Riparian habitat.

Since Safe Harbor's inception 11 years ago, more than 30 Safe Harbor Agreements have come into force nationwide, and hundreds of landowners are restoring wildlife habitat on nearly four million acres of land. In California, landowners have signed Safe Harbor Agreements on behalf of several species, including the San Joaquin kit fox, the California red-legged frog, the southwestern willow flycatcher, and the northern spotted owl.

More recently in California, two other Safe Harbor Agreements to benefit riparian forests are close to being signed. River Partners have offered to enroll their Del Rio Wildland Preserve in Glenn County in a Safe Harbor Agreement for the Valley elderberry longhorn beetle. In another Safe Harbor Agreement, the owners of two Tehama County ranches have crafted a Safe Harbor for the beetle and the California red-legged frog.



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One of many riparian forest species, the Valley elderberry longhorn beetle