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RCD plans big splash with water storage grant

Ponds help fire suppression, salmon flows

By August Howell
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Imagine 84 Olympic-sized swimming pools filled to the brim with water. That's how much water the San Mateo Resource Conservation District estimates it saves on the coast annually.

Thanks to millions of dollars from state and federal grants, the RCD is planning to save much more in the next three years. According to a release last week, the RCD received numerous grants from the California Department of Water Resources, the California Wildlife Conservation Board, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to build three water storage ponds on farms along the San Mateo County coast. The stored water will help address a variety of needs, including helping farmers deal with drought, fire suppression, and replenishing salmon habitat.

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Projects like this are critical in the rural, unincorporated part of the coast that doesn't have much water infrastructure, RCD Executive Director Kellyx Nelson said, because there's little summer rain, no snowpack and no large municipal reservoirs with connections to state resources. In terms of fire suppression, farmers can use ponds to defend their property or they could be used in a regional Cal Fire effort.

According to the release, the RCD has created or improved more than 170 acre-feet (over 55 million gallons) of water storage on the coast over the last several years. An acre-foot of water is about 326,000 gallons or enough water to cover an acre of land a foot deep. The recent funding will help the district establish three ponds on South Coast farms capable of holding 3.2 million cubic feet of water storage (about 37 Olympic-sized swimming pools). Construction is expected to be done by 2026.

The principle behind the project is that ponds will hold diverted water from creeks during wet weather months and will provide water security to farmers during dry months. That allows the creeks to flow naturally downstream and protect endangered fish.

“When it's dry is exactly when it's more impactful to take water out of the creek,” Nelson said. “And that's when water can be the most limiting factor for steelhead trout and coho salmon. Our solution is to give folks water storage so that they can divert when water is abundant and store it to use when water in the creek is low. ... it's a win-win.”

According to RCD's recently released 15-year impact report, the district has helped conserve more than 228 acre-feet of water (more than 72 million gallons) annually by developing water storage, fixing leaky infrastructure, and installing new irrigation equipment. That's roughly half the amount of water used by the South Coast residents each year. To view the report and learn about RCD's efforts to improve water storage, forest health and carbon sequestration, visit sanmateorcd.org/15-years/. ▪

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“Now more than ever, we are witnessing the harsh effects of extreme climate— atmospheric rivers followed by the hottest temperatures in recorded history,” state Sen. Josh Becker said in the release. “More must be done to adapt to this new reality by

investing in better ways to capture and store water for when we need it and to repair our environment. These grants are a necessary step towards achieving these goals, and I am proud of the work that the San Mateo Resource Conservation District is doing to adapt to this new climate reality and keep our community protected.”

August Howell