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New look at Oroville Dam spillway after reopening 0:53

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New video shows water coming down Oroville Dam's main spillway on March 21, 2017. The dam's main spillway fractured Feb. 7, 2017, prompting a temporary shutdown of the structure as a big storm rolled in. On Wednesday, more than a month after a near-catastrophe at Oroville Dam sparked mass evacuations, Butte County's sheriff Wednesday lifted an evacuation warning that had been in place for thousands of downstream residents. - Department of Water Resources

CALIFORNIA FORUM

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Taking rivers for granted, then seeing water from a different angle



BY KRISTINE AUBERT
Special to The Bee



After the election, I was scanning Craigslist for a new job and decided to search the "nonprofit sector" heading, hoping to find some meaningful work.



Friends of the River posted that it was accepting applications for a River Advocacy Training School. I didn't really know anything about rivers, except the way they worked on my spirit. I applied and was accepted.



OPINION



I dove into a world of water policy and it has expanded my perspective in ways I could never have imagined. I had no idea how nuanced the negotiation for water between humans and nature had become. I realized I have taken rivers and water for granted.

There is a lot of history behind water policy and there are very heated debates about how to balance the need to protect and preserve riparian habitats with humanity's increasing need.

In 2005 Friends of the River was involved in the relicensing of the Oroville Dam. Friends of the River, working with Sierra Club and the South Yuba River Citizens League, filed a motion to intervene in the relicensing, asking the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission to "issue a licensing order requiring the licensee to armor or otherwise reconstruct the ungated spillway," so it could be used safely.

The warnings went unheeded until it was too late. Earlier this year water flowed over the emergency spillway causing massive erosion that posed a grave danger to hundreds of thousands of people downstream.

Part of my training program involved a legislative visit the Capitol. I researched my state representatives and made an appointment. Ron Stork, the senior policy advocate for Friends of the River, and I met with state Sen. Jim Nielson's legislative director.

We discussed issues with the Oroville Dam, which is in Nielson's district. Ron did most of the talking, but I jumped in where I could. The important thing was for me to be there.

There always seems to be talk of building more dams, but dam building is not as cost effective as it once was. Damming a river yields diminishing returns. There are many ways that we can avoid construction and environmental costs while maximizing the water we already have.

We can make choices to manage our water more sustainably in urban and agricultural sectors. Better irrigation scheduling in agriculture, recycling highly-treated wastewater, repairing leaks in the urban water supply, cleaning up groundwater basins, and installing more efficient toilets. Those are just five steps we could take right now to reclaim 10 percent of our annual water usage.

I began the River Advocacy Training School three months ago. I have two months left until I complete the course, but I can already see that this is just a beginning. I have only scratched the surface of water - environmentally and politically.

It feels like my little contribution to this issue of our great political machine is nothing more than a drop in a bucket. And it is. But that's how we fill the bucket. One small, imperfect contribution at a time, until we turn the wheel of history.

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