

South Yuba River Citizens League unveils five-year strategic plan at annual 'State of the Yuba'

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It has been 20 years since the South Yuba River was designated a Wild & Scenic river. That milestone for the South Yuba River Citizens League, formed to protect the river against the development of six dams 16 years previously, was one of the highlights of the organization's annual "State of the Yuba" event held April 24.

But a presentation from Executive Director Melinda Booth made it clear that SYRCL is not content to rest on the laurels of past success, or even simply to maintain its current impressive slate of efforts including restoration, monitoring, science, outreach and education programs and the Wild & Scenic Film Festival.

"Now more than ever, we need to take action and do what we can to protect and restore land; meaningfully address climate change; ensure swimmable, fishable and drinkable water; and advocate for what is right and just, regardless of how difficult that work may be," Booth told those in attendance.

Some facets of SYRCL's advocacy will not change, Booth said.

"A lot of the work (outlined in the strategic plan) is a continuation of the same work we have been doing for a lot of years," she said. "This is our 19th year of river monitoring, and we will continue that."

The film festival and the river ambassador program will also remain vital parts of the plan, she said, adding, "Our foundational programs are going to stay."

According to Booth, the five-year strategic plan received input from all staff members at all levels.

The board spent a lot of time thinking about reworking SYRCL's vision for the Yuba River watershed, she said, adding, "Everything will feel like synergy with where SYRCL has been."

Then, Booth said, three new strategic goals were formulated: community engagement, landscape level conservation and restoration, and climate change resilience.

One major discussion, Booth said, involved the scope of SYRCL's work.

"We work on behalf of the Yuba on really broad issues," she said. "We decided the scope is not unequivocally defined by the watershed's physical boundaries, but rather is determined by the potential impacts and threats to the watershed."

The goal of climate change resilience, for example, is something that SYRCL has been working toward all along, but now that goal will be more explicit, Booth said.

"I've been in the environmental conservation world for 10 years, and there is a sense of urgency (now) that I haven't felt in the past," she said. "It feels like we've got to buckle down. Now's the time, climate change is real."

Booth firmly believes that even though the world is on a precipice, through action we can pull ourselves back from the edge.

"Our intent is to make sure our corner of the world does this right," she said.

Forest health in the Yuba River watershed will become a key focus of SYRCL's work over the next five years, Booth said. SYRCL will partner with the U.S. Forest Service, private landowners, and other nonprofits to implement projects to include removal of invasive plants and improving forest habitat through thinning and prescribed fire.

Through a combination of grants and matching funding, SYRCL will be hiring two watershed coordinators — in essence, forest ecologists, Booth said.

"It all relates to ecosystem health," she said. "That hadn't been an area of focus (for SYRCL) ... But when we stepped back and looked at it, it became something we can no longer not engage in."

SYRCL is already working on one project on the North Yuba River and is looking at the proposed biomass facility in Camptonville, with two more projects still to be identified.

"This will be a decades-long project," Booth said. "We're just getting started."

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