



The salmon returning to Butte Creek in 2013 topped 15,800, the largest run in many years. **Michael Smith** Friends of Butte Creek

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## Wildlife protectors on Butte Creek have a new battle cry: Save the dam

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In the annals of wild fish tales, hydroelectric projects are always cast as villains. They create dams that block fish from reaching spawning grounds.

The dams form reservoirs, warming the water to fish-killing temperatures. And hydro managers release water into streams when it profits their bottom line, not when it benefits fish and other wildlife.

Allen Harthorn is all for taking out dams – “every single one we can,” he said.

But when Pacific Gas & Electric Co. announced plans in February to decommission its DeSabra-Centerville Hydroelectric Project on Butte Creek, Harthorn was shocked.

After decades devoted to improving the habitat for spring-run Chinook salmon, he suddenly faced losing the progress he had so painstakingly gained without removing the three dams.

“We may be stuck with the same old beast we were stuck with 25 years ago,” Harthorn said.

DeSabra is a hydroelectric project where human-made has improved on nature. Without the cold flows its ditches and diversions deliver, California’s only stable Chinook spring run would be lost, said Tracy McReynolds, senior environmental scientist with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife.

“If we lose that as a water source – if we are subject to natural flows – it would pretty much wipe out this population,” she told me.

Hydro decommissioning may threaten conservation gains for more than Butte Creek salmon. DeSabra is one of the oldest hydro projects in California; its Centerville Powerhouse was commissioned in 1900.

But many of the state’s 267 water-powered electricity plants are aging beyond the point of profitability. With solar energy entering the market, owners will likely be walking away from more than DeSabra, said Ron Stock, senior policy advocate with Friends of the River.

New owners may not be committed to the improvements environmentalists like Harthorn fought for when they couldn’t remove the dams. And when things go wrong, they may not have the resources a utility like PG&E has to fix them. For another operator, “the resources may be the local handyman,” Stork said.

At DeSabra, the future of an entire species is at the mercy of competent management. Built by gold miners, it cobbles together three dams, three reservoirs, two operating powerhouses and a 20-mile mishmash of tunnels, flumes and canals northeast of Chico.

The system starts at 5,560 feet in a neighboring watershed, where two reservoirs collect cold water from the West Branch of the Feather River. PG&E releases water as needed through a canal across Paradise Ridge into Butte Creek, where it descends 4,000 feet into DeSabra Reservoir.

It is both the volume and the temperature of this high-elevation flow that has enhanced Butte Creek’s salmon population. After dams on the upper Sacramento and Pit rivers decimated other spring runs, Butte supports the most robust population of the four Sacramento River tributaries hosting the state and federally threatened species.

Since forming Friends of Butte Creek in 1999, Harthorn and others have worked with PG&E and public agencies to improve flows for spawning and create cold holding pools. Below DeSabra they removed dams and invested \$60 million in fish screens and land acquisitions.

The improvements rocketed the annual numbers of salmon returning to spawn from less than a hundred to tens of thousands. Today, Butte Creek is a spring-run Chinook stronghold key to preserving the species.

At a time when dam eradication is the darling of environmentalists, DeSabra is a conservation anomaly. While the 850 dams removed from waters across the country since 1999 have stabilized fish populations and improved the habitat for birds and other wildlife, taking down the DeSabra system would be unquestionably negative for salmon.

Last month PG&E began soliciting a new owner after the federal agency regulating dams refused to approve decommissioning. Harthorn hopes for the best but fears the worst: Less cold water in Butte Creek and a catastrophic salmon die-off.

Ironic as it may seem for a damn-the-dams advocate, he will battle through the uncertainties to make sure DeSabra continues to benefit salmon: "It's just something we have to do."

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