***FRIENDS OF THE CALAVERAS UPDATES***

***11.16.20***

***Jim Marsh***

1. ***Weekly monitoring of the UOP Native Grass Restoration site continues.***
2. ***Participation in Kohl School Professional Development Day with John Muir Laws: Monday, October 26***

As part of FCR’s continuing involvement with Des Forsberg’s Student Stewards of the Calaveras Program fellow volunteer Nan Ballot and I have participated in several Kohl Professional Development Days both as presenters and participants. The most recent was a four-hour virtual workshop with field guide author/naturalist Jack Laws. While he may be best known for his “Laws Field Guide to the Sierra Nevada” his deepest passion continues to be in inspiring people of all ages in the art, science and practice of nature journaling which he argues (and with plenty of academic studies to back him up) is a highly effective learning/teaching tool. I am a retired teacher. I have attended hundreds of Professional Development Days for educators. I have opined at more than one of those that—had I the choice—I might prefer to die in one since the change would be so slight. This has never been the case when Jack Laws is the instructor. Oct. 26 was no exception. In a full four+ hour ZOOM there was one 10 minute break in the action during which we were given a task to complete outdoors. No one dawdled or complained. Everyone returned in the allotted time with the task completed. Laws continues to inspire. FCR first met him many years ago and helped fund him to do two all-day presentations for the public the first at New Hogan Dam and a couple of years later at UOP.

It turns out that switching her students from journaling along the Calaveras over to journaling in their backyards is one assignment that Des has been able to continue largely uninterrupted during the COVID-19 school shutdown period.

Kohl and FCR also continue to collaborate with consultant Rob Wade (Learning Landscapes, Plumas County Office of Ed.) on school wide outdoor learning opportunities for all age groups. Kohl staff is engaged in on going planning to make their school environment even more of an outdoor focused one once students return full time.

***3. Calaveras Fish Group meeting November 4***

Hosted by The Department of Water Resources. This group headed by a DWR river specialist (Randy Beckwith) and comprised of other Calaveras River stakeholders including reps from Stockton East Water District, National Marine Fisheries, and US Fish and Wildlife Service had not met in several years prior to this recent ZOOM gathering.

As noted previously, there has been consistent recent progress on the Calaveras with regard to the removal of barriers to anadromous fish. Three significant fish migration “choke points” (of a total of almost 100 that have been mapped between the San Joaquin River and Bellota Weir east of Linden) have been successfully modified over the last five years. These include the Budiselich Road flashboard dam, The Caprini Low Flow Crossing and—the most recent upgrade—under the Central California Traction Company rail trestle near the Stockton Flea Market. The next project is to be the Hosie Low Flow Crossing which work will be very similar to that completed downstream at Caprini two years ago.

All of this is also linked significantly to the completion of the Habitat Conservation Plan for the Bellota Weir which was finally released earlier this year after a two decades long series of delays.

Proposed modifications at the Bellota site—along with further work on other fish migration barriers like those mentioned—would open significant potential spawning water all the way up to New Hogan Dam for the Chinook Salmon and Steelhead populations that have long been resident in the Calaveras but have been challenged for much of the last 125 years by human alterations to their habitat.

The completed design at the Caprini low flow crossing site also demonstrated that human needs and wildlife habitat conservation mitigations can complement one another rather than compete.

As anticipated in my previous notes, this meeting of the CFG did cover considerable ground regarding positive developments and plans regarding the Calaveras fishery. Which, while it has always been an intermittent one due to its largely rain fed water sources, nonetheless represents a significant source of salmon and steelhead stock as well as another source of genetic diversity for those populations.

Three slide presentations detailed:

1. The most current construction plans for the Hosie Low Flow Crossing improvements (plus pointing out the next sites in line on both the old channel and the Mormon Slough portion).
2. Proposals for modifications of the Bellota Weir (It should be noted this is a Stockton East Water District facility. My understanding is they will bear the brunt of the costs of the work to be done there.)
3. Results of studies on the river between Bellota Weir and Jenny Lind which include several ponded-in, Gold Rush era/legacy dredging pits. Suggested wetlands restoration efforts in and around those sites could serve to significantly moderate unnaturally elevated water temperatures (due to the large surface areas of the ponds) thereby improving conditions in what are potentially some of the best spawning beds in the entire Lower Calaveras. Such restoration work combined with successful modification of the Bellota Weir/fish barrier would dramatically upgrade the Calaveras River’s Steelhead and Chinook Salmon fishery prospects. While property owners there were initially resistant to “losing their ducks” in the event the large surface area ponds might be downsized, once ideas of restoring a more natural wetland habitat in their place were introduced much of that push-back was seen to evaporate.

Though it appears none of these projects are yet entirely funded (with the exception of the Hosie work) and the timeline for the entire package of proposed Bellota upgrades—by far the most costly--is 5-10 years, the vibe from all the professionals at the session was upbeat.

I have now seen three major barrier removal projects completed on the Calaveras since 2013. I first began hearing about proposed ones at least five years prior to completion of the first one of those. While that might seem A) snail pace slow and B) a drop in the bucket considering another 90+ exist, it is exciting to see so much effort and so many resources continuing to go to these top priority Calaveras project sites on what many consider a “minor tributary” particularly in these times when environmental efforts and regional leaders have been under such heavy fire from Federal policy makers.

(While there is considerable technical detail, many of the slides I viewed were put together for general audiences. Let me know if you’d like to see them. I have complete copies of the slide presentations from the meeting. I believe I can forward them but will need to get permission from the authors.)

Going forward…

…after the meeting I contacted chair, DWR Riverine Projects Specialist Randy Beckwith, to further introduce myself and Friends of the Calaveras. When I told him of the Native Grass Demonstration Restoration Site at UOP he expressed interest in a visit to the site. He and two of his colleagues will be coming to Stockton on Thursday, Nov. 16 to view the status of the Central California Traction RR trestle site near West Lane and will later come by UOP. At 12:30 we will meet at the UOP Footbridge.

For some time I have also been lobbying Julie Rentner, President of River Partners (with whom FLCR collaborated on establishing the restoration project at UOP in 2012) to come by to see what has become over the last 8 years of what RP calls their “smallest restoration site” (about 3 hectares…in contrast their “Dos Rios Project” in Stanislaus County includes many hundreds).

When she heard I had Randy’s crew coming Nov. 16 she enthusiastically signed on and will be here with a couple of other RP people. What Julie and RP bring is the potential wherewithal—technically and financially--to collaborate with DWR on restoration of those wetland sites upriver from Bellota Weir.

Given the COVID-19 situation having a large group meeting (at this point it looks like ~6-8 people) didn’t seem a great idea but I think being outdoors and masked we can keep everyone safe for the relatively short time we anticipate being in close proximity.

1. ***Tabled items I will continue to pursue:***
2. Contacting Pete Otteson re: possible education opportunities at Medford Island as an appropriate use for some of the Mallory Funds
3. Exploring platforms for future virtual general membership meetings other than ZOOM, Teams or Facebook using some of the models being employed by some performance artists (musicians, theatre companies, for example) whose venues are all currently closed. These are much less interactive than ZOOM or Teams meetings (and also without the latency issues or other glitchiness) but do have some of the chat features a Facebook program can deploy allowing for a certain amount of Q&A as would be typical at the end of any FTF Sierra Club general membership session. Since there are a lot of other issues with Facebook as a platform looking at some other options may be of use.