

Symposium throws spotlights on Napa's watersheds

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Napa County on Friday celebrated its watershed improvement successes and looked at challenges ahead amid a four-year drought and climate change predictions.

“Talking about innovation and watershed in the same breath is really the success story of Napa Valley,” state Sen. Lois Wolk said.

Wolk was the keynote speaker during the Napa County Watershed Symposium at City Winery. About 300 people attended, from elected officials such as Napa Mayor Jill Techel and county Supervisors Keith Caldwell and Alfredo Pedroza to researchers.

The county’s water is on the move, both above ground in the Napa River and creeks and below ground in aquifers. It is used by farmers to irrigate crops and city-dwellers for drinking. It creates habitats that nurture fish and other wildlife.

Symposium presenters outlined an array of restoration efforts, from widening an eroded Napa River channel in the Rutherford area to turning 10,000 acres of salt ponds to wetlands north of American Canyon. Napa River bridge replacement projects can be designed to also create fresh water shrimp habitat.

“We know there’s a lot happening out there that looks really good,” said Dyan Whyte, assistant executive officer for the San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board.

More research is needed to measure progress, she said. As a baseline, Napa River waters from 1990 through the early 2000s had 180 percent of the natural sediment supply, a condition that hurts Chinook salmon and steelhead trout.

Jonathan Koehler, senior biologist with the Napa Resource Conservation District, talked about monitoring steelhead smolt numbers and sizes. The data indicates a small, but stable population, with more data is needed.

“The more smolt that are produced, the bigger they are, the more healthy the conditions of the watershed where they grew up,” Koehler said.

In that sense, a decade’s worth of watershed improvement projects can be judged in part by doing research on steelhead trout and Chinook salmon.

“This is a direct reflection of those projects,” Koehler said. “If these projects are working, we should see it in the fish populations.”

But the watershed faces challenges. One task is to keep the invasive Zebra and Quagga mussels out of Lake Berryessa in eastern Napa County. They have been found only 120 miles away in San Justo Reservoir in San Benito County.

The mussels become attached to boats and are spread that way from lake to lake. Once in a lake, the mussels affect the food chain and damage boat motors. Their shells can litter beaches.

Lake Berryessa has the calcium, water temperatures and other conditions ideal for the mussels, said Chris Lee, water resources specialist for the Solano County Water Agency.

“Unfortunately, as you can see, we’re right in their wheelhouse,” Lee said.

Efforts to keep the mussels out of Lake Berryessa include having interns tell boaters about the problems the mussels cause. However, not every boat that goes into Lake Berryessa is inspected.

For Wolk, the drought and climate change are additional reasons to put watersheds in a spotlight. She said the Napa County Watershed Symposium couldn’t have come at a better time.

“What I say is, ‘Welcome to the new normal,’” Wolk said. “We have to start thinking about our water policies in a new way.”