



July 5, 2025

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 San Joaquin Area Flood Control Agency (SJAFC)A  
 2800 West March Lane, Suite 200  
 Stockton, CA 95219

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Sacramento District,  
 Public Affairs Office,  
 1325 J St., Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Mr. Al-Hindi and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers:

On behalf of American Rivers, Restore the Delta, Trust for Public Land, Sierra Club Delta-Sierra Group, Little Manila Rising, Concrete Development Inc., Black Urban Farmer's Association, and Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Stockton Environmental Justice Program, we are writing to provide public comments on the Draft Supplemental Environmental Assessment (SEA)/ Subsequent Environmental Impact Report (SEIR) for the Lower San Joaquin River (LSJR) Project Compensatory Mitigation Plan (CMP) and submit comments.

After reviewing the Draft SEA/SEIR, we have comments on the following topics: Van Buskirk setback levee, project communication, public access in the Van Buskirk Park project, the unhoused community in CMP projects, and green gentrification.

## Setback Levee on Van Buskirk

Stockton is an incredibly resilient city that has been addressing flooding since its founding. However, as of 2024, it is the one of the highest flood-vulnerable cities in the United States. With 93% of residential properties at risk of flood damage within the next 30 years (Admin, 2024), it is incredibly important to build infrastructure that protects the community. That is one of the reasons why we are supportive of setting back the levee at Van Buskirk Park from its current configuration to reconnect the San Joaquin River and French Camp Slough to the historic adjacent floodplain, restore hydrology, grade and plant native vegetation to establish appropriate elevations for wetland and riparian habitat, and remove rock from the remnant levee. A levee setback has multiple ecological and flood risk reduction benefits. According to the National Levee Safety Guidelines (NLSG), ecological benefits include decreased scour and erosion, improved aquatic habitat, increased wetlands, increased overbank flows and inundation areas, improved upland habitat and wildlife connection, and the development of new drainage pathways (Table 1). The new levee will reduce the flood risk to people and property; but a levee set further back from the water will decrease water velocity and erosion, placing less strain on the levee and reducing the risk of failure. By allowing the San Joaquin River to spread out across a larger floodplain, the LSJR Project accomplishes its mission of reducing levee-associated flood risk to the City of Stockton, while simultaneously meeting mitigation requirements, reducing the need for mitigation credits. The environmental effects analyses, as well as the mitigation strategies associated with them are sufficient at addressing potential environmental concerns.

Table 1. Levee removal and associated ecological effects table from the National Levee Safety Guidelines. Though the table title shows only "levee removal" these benefits also apply to setback levees according to the document.

**Table 11-1: Levee Removal and Associated Ecological Effects**

Potential Effects	Ecological Benefit	Ecological Risk
Decrease in velocity	Reduced scour and bank erosion, improved riverine fish passage and aquatic habitat, increased sediment bedload deposition.	Sedimentation of existing habitat.
Increase in overbank flows and inundation area	Increasing post-removal riparian, wetland, and other floodplain habitat.	Negative impacts of inundation on existing upland habitat and vegetation in overbank areas.
	Increased aquifer recharge in freshwater systems.	
Improve upland habitat and wildlife connection	Improved access and connectivity between upland habitat and the waterbody.	Increased wildlife and human interaction with negative consequences.
Disruption to existing drainage pathways	Development of new drainage pathways, designed to maximize ecological benefit.	Impacts on existing habitat along drainage pathways.

The setback levee is also an opportunity to support Stockton's frontline communities. Not only will the setback levee reduce the risk of flooding to neighborhoods already coping with environmental and socioeconomic burdens, but it will also have ancillary benefits as well (Section 3.12.2). We concur with the analysis that this project has the potential to provide the community with improved aesthetics, as well as opportunities for outdoor recreation, enhance public access to greenspace, and create urban shade in the long run. Furthermore, research and data have shown that communities with higher quantities of nature and trees tend to have greater community well-being, which includes happiness, general health, lower stress, less aggression, and increased attention (Jaffe,

2015). If done with proper community engagement and planning, the setback levee at Van Buskirk Park will be a positive amenity for the frontline communities in South Stockton.

We would also like to acknowledge that the Van Buskirk Park setback levee is only analyzed at the program-level in the CMP and additional environmental review will be required under CEQA prior to construction. We look forward to reading and providing feedback on any additional environmental analysis.

#### Project Communication

We are disappointed with the lack of communication for the rollout of the CMP SEIR/SEA and the lack of communication to inform members of the public about the public meeting that occurred on June 2, 2025, which resulted in no members of the public attending.

A key feature of the CEQA and NEPA review process is the opportunity for the public to provide input on EIRs. Despite public interest, there was no communication about the completion of the draft CMP SEIR/SEA document and the opportunity for public review. Organizations that are part of this coalition had to learn about the CMP SEIR/SEA and associated public review period indirectly through other community organizations. If the timeline for the draft CMP SEIR/SEA was available to organizations earlier, there would have been enough time for them to more effectively engage with community members and additional organizations to submit public comments.

The lack of communication to the public and the community has also negatively impacted community engagement at the CMP SEIR/SEA public meeting. The June 2 public meeting was not advertised on the USACE website. Only three people attended the public meeting: one city staff member, one Restore The Delta staff member, and one American Rivers staff member. Although we appreciate the informative presentation that was also offered in Spanish, there was no one from the public. The outreach for the public meeting was therefore inadequate. Had a communication and subsequent timeline been shared, organizations would have had enough time to let other community members and organizations know. The Stockton community is comprised of a network of organizations and individuals who are interested in flood risk reduction in their community and would have attended the meeting to learn more about the mitigation opportunities at Van Buskirk Park.

Chapter 3 of the Draft National Levee Safety Guidelines states “robust community engagement may also be necessary if the levee removal or setback project has the potential to impact public safety and/or areas of community interest”. The lack of communication about the project status and documents within the last few months is concerning, far from robust, and does not lead to equitable and fair development. We urge the USACE and SJAFCA to widely advertise all opportunities for public engagement. We also urge the USACE and SJAFCA to distribute a community survey specifically related to the setback levee. American Rivers, Restore The Delta, and partners have drafted a survey that can be used to obtain robust community engagement on the setback levee.

#### Public Access inside Van Buskirk Park Project

The Van Buskirk property was given to the City of Stockton by the Van Buskirk family provided it’s used only for recreation. Throughout the CMP, enhanced public access and recreation, especially in the Van Buskirk Park, was mentioned as a benefit. However, Section 3.3.1 states that "Upon completion, public recreational access would be permitted at Van Buskirk Park, outside of the revegetated areas. Restoration of riparian and wetland habitat at each of the proposed parcels would increase opportunities for nature-based recreation, such as birdwatching and wildlife viewing”. Since a majority of the mitigation area is expected to be revegetated, it is ambiguous what amenities there are to accommodate public recreational access and exactly how much space will be available to the public. From the conceptual designs of Van Buskirk Park mitigation area and the approved Master Plan by the City of Stockton, there appears to be a network of paths in the mitigation area, but it is not yet confirmed. As

stated in the previous section, we understand that the Van Buskirk Park mitigation site still needs to be analyzed at a project level, so details and necessary analyses will be determined at a later date. However, we would like to emphasize the importance of having publicly accessible recreation opportunities in the mitigation area such as a low impact interpretive nature trail meandering through the new wetland habitat and opportunities to access the river. We believe publicly accessible low-impact trails and river access can be designed to be compatible with Conservation Element CO-80 (Control human access to sensitive habitat areas on public lands to minimize impact upon and disturbance of special status species), while still meeting the City's requirement to use the Van Buskirk property for recreation. Most of the benefits of greenspaces to the community will not be present unless the community can have adequate access to the greenspace. In addition to providing further opportunities for recreation, public access inside the Van Buskirk mitigation area invites the public to become more involved in the public planning process and support the inclusion of a setback levee.

### Unhoused Community

Section 3.12: Avoidance and Minimization Measures states that USACE will work with San Joaquin County to minimize the impacts to unhoused communities. However, Section 3.12.14 states that "Unhoused members of the community would be contacted prior to construction to allow adequate time to relocate." Will this be the only method of minimizing impacts to the unhoused community in urbanized areas such as Van Buskirk Park and the Calaveras River Parcels? If so, this will not be enough to minimize the potential effects on the unhoused community. With a 104% increase in number of unhoused individuals in the county from 2022 to 2024 (Section 3.12.1), there is also an increasingly limited number of safe places for people to relocate to. This is especially true if that growth continues until the start of construction at Van Buskirk Park in 2033 and the Calaveras River Parcel in 2035. The potential influx of people may increase the strain on temporary shelter and other related services in the county. Even with announcements prior to construction, depending on a variety of factors, securing housing can take even take longer than six months (Rose & Neild, 2019).

Although informing the community prior to construction is an important step to minimize the effects of displacing people living in encampments, it is important to have a plan to do so. As with other minimization/avoidance measures in the CMP, best practices need to be implemented. Below are a few examples of applicable best practices that are provided in the 19 Strategies for Communities to Address Encampments Humanely and Effectively document written by the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (2024):

- Ask encampment residents what housing and service options they need and want
- Collaborate with the agencies responsible for providing and connecting people to services and housing and connect resources to Coordinated Entry
- Secure and coordinate transportation from encampments to housing and services for every resident
- Create timelines for planning, outreach, engagement, notice, closure, and site restoration
- Provide encampment residents with verbal and written notices in plain and multiple languages of a closure at least 30 days in advance.
- Offer low-barrier shelter, short-term or permanent housing, or residential treatment to every person living in an encampment, and ensure availability on day of closure.
- Communicate clearly with residents early and often about the process, housing and shelter options, and storage, among other things. Provide residents at least two days to sort and pack personal items prior to closure—unless there is an environmental health or urgent safety issue

It is imperative to have a plan and timeline with the unhoused community to minimize the impact of displacement. We strongly urge USACE and SJAFCA to work with local NGOs such as St. Mary's Community Service and

Stockton209Cares in addition to San Joaquin County to get a better understanding of the unhoused community at Van Buskirk, develop a plan/timeline for potential encampment closure, and ensure that there is adequate temporary and permanent housing for the displaced people.

### Green Gentrification

Although we agree that there is likely to be positive socioeconomic impacts from CMP projects, it is important to note that the analyses found within the CMP do not take into account the effects of green gentrification. Green gentrification, the displacement of typically working-class communities of color as a result of new greenspaces that leads to increased housing costs (Anguelovski et al., 2022), would nullify the positive socioeconomic impact of CMP projects. In many instances, urban green development projects, such as the Van Buskirk Park have led to increased economic distress in the surrounding area. Green gentrification is well-documented and prevalent with many urban greenspace projects similar to the Van Buskirk Park and Calaveras River Parcel projects. It has been recorded in Atlanta, GA, with the Atlanta Beltline Project, in Brooklyn, NY with the Gowanus Canal and Prospect Park revitalizations, and many more cases around the world.

Below are some articles, that have documented this phenomenon:

- Literature Review on Green Gentrification (Jelks et al., 2021)
- Atlanta, GA: The Atlanta Beltline Project (Immergluck & Balan, T. 2017)
- Brooklyn, NY: Gowanus Canal & Prospect Park (Gould & Lewis, 2012)
- New York City: Census + Housing Analysis (Du & Zhang, 2020)
- Barcelona, Spain: Spatial Analysis of Green Gentrification (Anguelovski et al., 2017)

The threat of green gentrification does not mean that mitigation, such as at the Van Buskirk Park, should not occur; however, it means it is vital that the project team take the necessary steps to address the potential damage to the community. Figure 1 is a graphic from the Equitable Development Toolkit, written by River Network and NPS (Fullmer & Mazurek, 2024), that shows how green projects can lead to gentrification and potential ways to reduce the risk to communities throughout the process. It is important to note that all solutions to reduce the risk of green gentrification involve authentic community engagement. Endeavors, such as the 11th Street Bridge Project and other projects within the [Highline Network](#), have utilized similar methods to address gentrification (Jacobs, 2017).

Although not analyzed in the SEA/SEIR, by working with organizations, such as American Rivers and Restore The Delta, who have already been performing community engagement, USACE and SJAFCA have already taken the first steps to interrupt the cycle of gentrification. However, that is not enough. To have equitable development, the project team needs to authentically listen to the community and, within reason, allow for community decision making and implement their necessary feedback. We believe that the future community meeting surrounding the proposed Van Buskirk setback levee, organized by USACE and the City of Stockton, and subsequent integration of community input into the mitigation planning at Van Buskirk Park is going to be vital in the overall success of the project, and the long-term stewardship and use of the park.

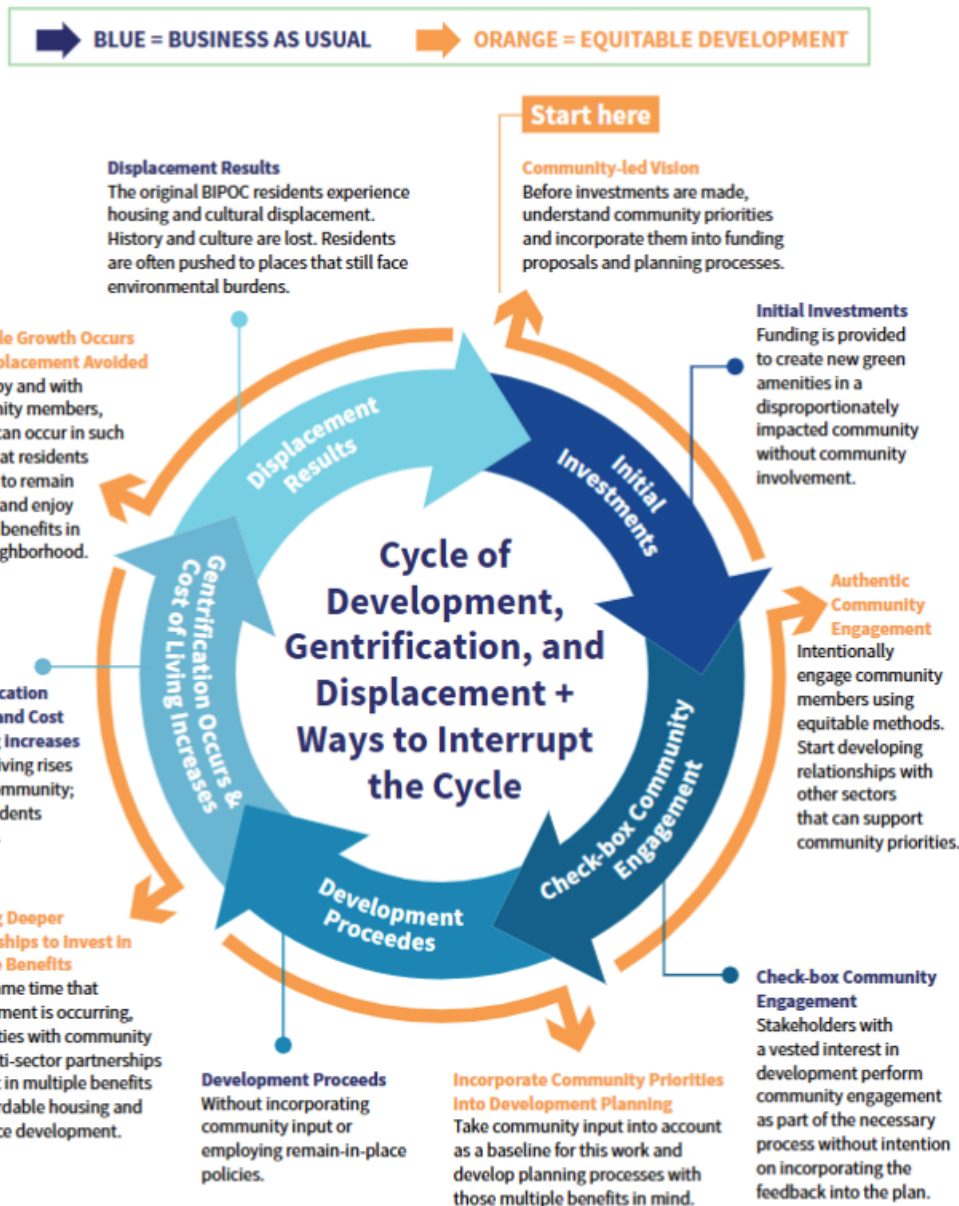


Figure 1. Cycle of Development, Gentrification, and Displacement and Ways to Interrupt the Cycle from the Equity Development Toolkit written by River Network and the National Park Service (Fullmer & Mazurek, 2024)

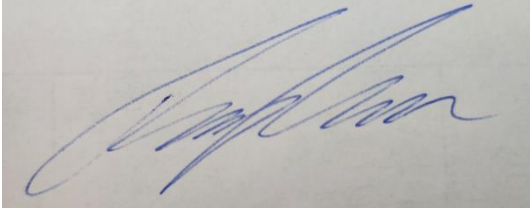
## Conclusion

Overall, we support the CMP Projects, specifically the setback levee at Van Buskirk Park and the creation of publicly accessible recreational opportunities in the setback area. If done with authentic community engagement and proper communication, these projects have the potential to provide a net benefit for the people of San Joaquin County that goes beyond flood risk reduction. However, it is important to work alongside the community to have an equitable result. The plan to address the unhoused community, as well as project team communication, need to improve in order for these projects to be successful. Moving forward, please communicate with all project partners and thus the public about any updates in the process.

Thank you for your consideration of our views.



Sincerely,



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Associate Director, Central Valley River Restoration**



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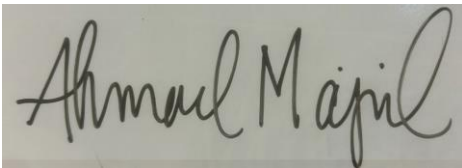
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