

California Fish Passage Forum Sees Generational Opportunity to Increase Fish Passage

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With the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act ([H.R. 3684](#)) signed into law yesterday, a generational opportunity was presented to not only create new infrastructure but repair the ecological damage of obsolete structures that have fundamentally changed our nation's rivers. The Infrastructure bill is intended to promote transformative, efficient and cost-saving transportation programs while creating natural infrastructure that protects and enhances surface transportation assets while improving ecosystem conditions for functional rivers and estuarine systems. The Act sets aside billions of dollars for federal agencies and tribal nations to upgrade bridges, dams and culverts which have blocked passage of aquatic species for decades. As these structures are improved or removed, migration to historic habitat is restored and native fish populations can rebound. The solutions that have the best chance of success support both wildlife and people.



The California Fish Passage Forum (<https://www.cafishpassageforum.org/>) is a partnership formed



among state, local, and federal agencies and fisheries conservation groups to restore and recover anadromous fish populations by improving fish passage at man-made barriers. The Forum's mission is to protect and revitalize anadromous fish populations in California by restoring connectivity of freshwater habitats throughout their historic range. Passage impediments affect adult and juvenile fish by delaying or preventing upstream and downstream migration, preventing the use of available habitat, and inflicting injury. Thus, the objectives that the Forum seeks to implement focus on identifying and remediating these barriers to improve native aquatic species' connectivity.

The Forum is part of the National Fish Habitat Partnership (NFHP) Program, funded through Congress. The NFHP Board recently approved the FY23 Conservation Priorities including: 1) Protect intact healthy waters, 2) Restore hydrologic conditions for fish, 3) Reconnect fragmented fish habitats, 4) Restore water quality, and 5) Coordination and operational support for FHPs to make on-the-ground progress within program appropriations. These priorities are squarely in line with the intent of the Infrastructure Act. Forum federal and state agencies work cooperatively to improve fish passage, identify and prioritize barrier for remediation, and oversee grant programs that remediate such barriers.

The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act allocations and funding priorities include the following in the recognition that protecting fish will ultimately restore rivers, improve water quality, and support resilient coastal communities.

- NOAA \$6B for Investing in coastal communities and climate resilience; \$400,000,000 for restoring fish passage by removing in-stream barriers and providing technical assistance; and \$1B for Pacific Salmon restoration and conservation for the purposes of supporting the restoration and conservation of Pacific salmon and steelhead populations and the habitat of those populations, including by improving climate resilience and climate adaptation.
- Department of the Interior \$200,000,000 for restoring fish and wildlife passage by removing in-stream barriers and providing technical assistance under the National Fish Passage Program.
- US Forest Service \$10,000,000 for the removal of non-hydropower Federal dams and for providing dam removal technical assistance; and \$80,000,000 to establish a collaborative-based, landscape-scale restoration program to restore water quality or fish passage on Federal land, including Indian forest land or rangeland.
- FEMA \$75,000,000 for the removal of dams.
- US Army Corps of Engineers \$115,000,000 to restore fish and wildlife passage by removing in-stream barriers and provide technical assistance to non-Federal interests carrying out such activities under the aquatic ecosystem restoration program under section 206 - Water Resources Development Act of 1996.

Broader initiatives are described in CHAPTER 67--Multimodal Infrastructure Investments such as the National Culvert Removal, Replacement and Restoration Grant Program; and those that fund fish passage for threatened and endangered anadromous fish stocks. The bill also provides funding for environmental improvements at hydropower facilities for new or upgraded turbine technology, fish ladders, fishways, and all other associated technologies. Title VIII Natural Resources-Related Infrastructure, Wildfire Management and Ecosystem Restoration describes funding for bridges to increase community resilience to climate change impacts, flooding, and improve fish passage.

Cost sharing between federal and state agencies is key to moving these restoration projects forward. As Sam Jenniches of the California State Coastal Conservancy and Forum signatory says "The Coastal Conservancy has long supported and funded projects that contribute to the restoration and conservation of Pacific salmon and steelhead populations. These are true multi-benefit projects that benefit coastal watersheds, outdoor recreation and the economy. Federal support from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act will help fish populations rebound more quickly by expanding California's ability to implement critical projects that enhance the habitats of these salmonid species and ensure their ability to migrate through our rivers."

Chris Wood, Trout Unlimited CEO, brings these elements together to observe that "Conservation is often an incremental game, and recovering degraded rivers and streams often requires funding from multiple sources. Passage of the bipartisan infrastructure bill means a once-in-a-generation investment in the future of our salmon, steelhead and trout streams, and delivers major support for coldwater conservation through funding for removing or mitigating fish passage barriers, reconnecting rivers and floodplains, improving water quality, retrofitting and possibly removing dams, replacing or decommissioning old roads and culverts, and making forests and watersheds more resilient to wildfire and other impacts of climate change."

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