



Bakersfield.com

## **Community Voices: Making the most of the Kern River: A river hard at work for the hard-working people of Kern County**

**By: Edwin Camp, DM Camp & Sons, Local Farmer and Business Owner**

**Nov 28, 2021**

[https://www.bakersfield.com/opinion/community-voices/community-voices-making-the-most-of-the-kern-river-a-river-hard-at-work-for/article\\_5a1655f2-4d8e-11ec-9f53-13495a147e66.html](https://www.bakersfield.com/opinion/community-voices/community-voices-making-the-most-of-the-kern-river-a-river-hard-at-work-for/article_5a1655f2-4d8e-11ec-9f53-13495a147e66.html)



Edwin Camp of DM Camp & Sons is a local farmer and business owner.

The Kern River is the lifeblood of Kern County — supporting families, farmers, small businesses and disadvantaged communities according to the law of the river. The river is governed by more than a century of well-established water rights laws and court decisions that protect the river's highly variable and limited water supplies for beneficial uses like irrigation, water for homes and business, groundwater recharge and recreation.

For residents and businesses in Bakersfield, it's hard to ignore the fact that the Kern River running through town is dry most of the time. As environmentalists and community groups increase their calls for a free-flowing river through the city, the people of Kern County deserve to have this justified ambition placed into context, because Kern River water isn't infinite and sending more water through the river will require some difficult trade-offs.

The Kern River is supplied through infrequent wet years followed by long periods of drought — and the droughts are only getting longer and more intense. Right now, 89 percent of Kern County is experiencing exceptional drought conditions. The Kern River is at its lowest water level since the devastating 2015 drought, with only 25 percent of average flow to date. For the 59,700 farmers and 4,900 food manufacturers who make up 20 percent of the county's workforce (2020) and support the region's \$7.6 billion agricultural economy (2020), this means fields are forced to fallow, orchards are removed and vegetable yields remain low.

For the people living in Kern County, and especially small disadvantaged communities like Shafter and Wasco, the impacts of drought and the Kern River's incredibly variable water supply cannot be overstated. These communities depend on agriculture for one-third of the jobs that put food on the table, pay the bills and keep a roof over their heads.

The fact of the matter is that during dry years, there simply isn't enough water to meet the needs of the people, farmers and disadvantaged communities that depend on the river, while also keeping the river flowing through Bakersfield for aesthetic reasons or to fully restore historic watershed ecosystems.

While we support running water down the river in wet years — when there is enough to go around — we can't pretend there is enough water year-round to keep the Kern River flowing without taking water away from the people, farms and communities that depend on it.

The law of the river exists for a very clear reason — to provide a legal framework for allocating the Kern River's limited water resources and according to long-established water rights to responsibly manage supplies to its highest and best use.

The question is not whether water should be sent through the river, or whether improving the aesthetics and restoring habitat represent beneficial uses of river water — they do. The question is, what trade-offs are we willing to make to support these uses? Should we take the water that farmers and families in disadvantaged communities rely on? Should we release more water from Lake Isabella — decreasing the stored water that helps us get through droughts and limiting recreational opportunities there? If water users forgo needed supplies in order to send it down the river, they would be forced to pump more groundwater to meet their customers' needs. What impact would that have on the groundwater basin? What impacts would sending more water through the river have on water rates?

The answers to these questions will have serious implications for Kern County's future, our way of life and our economic sustainability. For this reason, a new group of water users, community members, businesses and agricultural organizations have formed the Sustainable Kern River Coalition. Our coalition seeks to provide a forum for all of Kern's varied water interests to work through these issues together at the local level.

The Kern is a river hard at work for the hard-working people of Kern County. Making the most of the river's limited water resources will require us to operate from the same set of facts. Before we ask more of the river, let's be honest about what water uses will be of the greatest benefit for Kern's people and allocate Kern River water in a way that reflects our values, our way of life and our identity as a farming community.

--

*Edwin Camp of DM Camp & Sons is a local farmer and business owner.*