



# Sustainable Kern River

Newsletter | April 2024



## Flood Control: The Cornerstone of Kern River Water Management

*The Role of Isabella Dam and Downstream Diversion Weirs in Providing a Flood Control Protection for Bakersfield and Beyond*

Flood control isn't simply an added benefit of the infrastructure we use to manage Kern River water, it is the essential and most important function of that infrastructure and a public safety mandate. **As local water leaders and managers collaborate to study an interim flow regime for the Kern River through Bakersfield, we must all operate from the same premise: public safety comes first.** Yes, it comes before the needs of the Valley's agricultural economy. And yes, it comes before the needs of fish and other instream resources. That is why flows through the Kern River will always need to be first managed to prevent flood risk. The safety of the people of Bakersfield and other downstream communities, including disadvantaged communities like Corcoran and Allensworth, depend on there being capacity in the river to safely manage high excess flows to prevent the river from spilling over.

**1893** — The Kern has always been an incredibly “flashy” river. With massive swings between wet and dry years. Prior to the construction of Isabella Dam and the six weirs between the first and second points of measurement, downstream flooding in Bakersfield was a common occurrence — damaging local homes, farms and businesses.



*Downtown Bakersfield Flood, 1893*



*Flooding damage from the 1951 flood to Highway 178, which closely follows the Kern River down to Bakersfield*

**1953** — Lake Isabella’s main and auxiliary dams were completed and began serving Kern County and the surrounding cities with flood risk management, irrigation, and recreation.

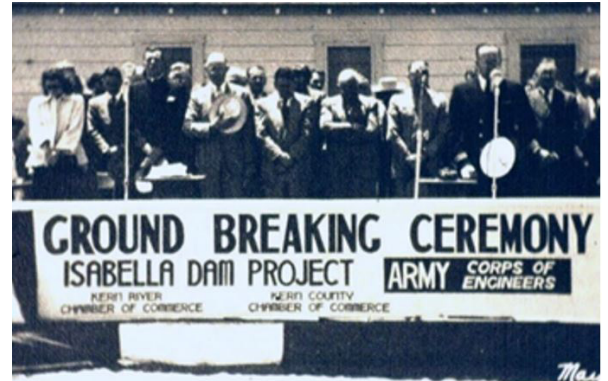


*ABC 23 News Director Inspecting Kern River Overflow at Stockdale Highway, where the Kern River Walk Park is today*

**1983** — The Kern River experienced record-breaking inflows, with about 14,000 cubic feet per second coming into Lake Isabella due to massive snowmelt that year. But thanks to Isabella Dam, the Army Corps was able to slowly release that water, avoiding flood risk and damage to downstream Bakersfield.

“Every available canal and ditch was used to divert as much flow as possible. All districts connected to the Kern River set aside differences on (river) rights and let as much water as possible be used at every opportunity.” — Florn Core, Retired Director of Bakersfield’s Water Resources Department, [as reported by the Bakersfield Californian](#).

**1951** — During construction of Isabella Dam, another flood washed away bridges in the canyon and nearly reached the city of Bakersfield. This would be the last flood before the dam was complete, and the last flood to cause significant damage to the region.



*Community groups, including the Kern River Chamber of Commerce and Kern County Chamber of Commerce, celebrate the completion of Isabella Dam with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers*

**1966** — Thanks to the ability to store water in Lake Isabella, along with other southern San Joaquin Valley flood-control reservoirs, record-breaking inflows from the '66 flood were significantly reduced – preventing \$81.3 million in damages.



*Record-breaking '83 Kern River flows successfully diverted into the California Aqueduct via the Kern River Intertie to avoid flood damage*





*Ranch equipment in floodwaters from the reemerging Tulare Lake*

**2023** — Record winter snowpack 237% greater than the April 1 historical average combined with rainfall 180% over the 10-year historical average for the Valley led to significantly higher Kern River flows. While no Kern River water contributed to Tulare Lake flooding in 2023, these same conditions contributed to the flooding and reemergence of Tulare Lake from rivers north of Kern County, damaging infrastructure, equipment and flooding the local communities of Corcoran and Allensworth.

## Kern County Water Monitor

There is no shortage of media coverage when it comes to California water. Finding the most relevant articles to better understand how current weather conditions, groundwater management, irrigation efficiency and so many other issues stand to impact water availability in Kern County can be a daunting task. SKRC continues to monitor the wide range of voices weighing in on these subjects and more through our “Kern County Water Monitor.” We pulled out just a couple of the articles that we found particularly noteworthy to share with you.



### California zombie lake turned farmland to water. A year later, is it gone for good?

By: Dani Anguiano, The Guardian  
March 24, 2024

“Tulare Lake has shrunk to just 2,625 acres, according to the Kings county office of emergency services. Officials expect its ‘imminent disappearance’, said Abraham Valencia, with the office of emergency services, ‘barring unforeseen snowmelt runoff causing upstream flooding’. The lake covered private land, and now some farming is resuming, Nate Ferrier with the county sheriff’s office told a [local news outlet](#).

‘We’ve got tractors and trucks moving around and fields are getting prepared to start growing crops again,’ Ferrier said.”

## 'It's Insanity' Lake Isabella community gears up for fishing derby weekend

By: Corey O'Leary, ABC23

March 19, 2024

"With the Lake Isabella Fishing Derby right around the corner — locals are preparing for the wave of tourism.

'Like twenty-five years,' said Weldon resident Thomas Mullens, talking about how many years he's participated in the fishing derby.

He says the atmosphere of the valley changes over the weekend.

'Oh it's just insane, it's insanity.'"



# The Bakersfield Californian

## Letter to the editor: Fish flow water for the Kern River

By: Steven Alan Lafond, Bakersfield Californian

March 10, 2024

"While I admire the efforts of the honorable Kern County Judge Gregory Pulskamp to rule that Kern River water shall flow from point A to point B (Beardsley River Weir to McClung Weir) in order to sustain a fish population throughout the Kern River Corridor, I believe this judgment is not harmonious with the 150-plus-year history of Kern River water rights, nor does it recognize the frailties of Kern River snowmelt yield from year to year, or the need for regular maintenance of the major diversion weirs the city of Bakersfield operates."

## What once looked like a weak water year on the Kern River has grown stronger

By: Steven Mayer, Bakersfield Californian

March 8, 2024

"What a difference a month makes.

There has been some hand-wringing this winter regarding California's 2024 water outlook, especially in the southern mountains and the Kern River Watershed. But new reports are pointing toward a much more favorable water year, including in the Kern River Basin, and by extension, Isabella Lake storage."





## At Kern County Water Summit Experts Speak About Path Towards SGMA Compliance

By: Corey O'Leary, ABC23

March 7, 2024

"The Water Association of Kern County's mission is to inform and educate the community of Kern County about our top water issues," said Jenny Holtermann, the Executive Director of the Water Association of Kern County.

The conference was organized by the water association and featured topics such as water banking, common infrastructure roadblocks, and compliance with the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act, or SGMA."

## Follow SKRC on Twitter (X)



Stay part of the conversation on Twitter (X): <https://twitter.com/SustainTheKern>.

While the SKRC will continue to release regular newsletters, following the SKRC Twitter account is a great way to receive even more of our commentary and engage with us on the most recent Kern River water stories as they happen in real time.

## About the Sustainable Kern River Coalition

The Sustainable Kern River Coalition is a regional group of water users, community members and business interests who are committed to protecting and maintaining the rights and access to Kern River water that support the families, farmers, small businesses and disadvantaged communities who are the backbone of Kern County's economy. If you or your organization is interested in joining the Sustainable Kern River Coalition, or in receiving additional information, contact us at [info@sustainablekernriver.org](mailto:info@sustainablekernriver.org).