CALIFORNIA Water Boards

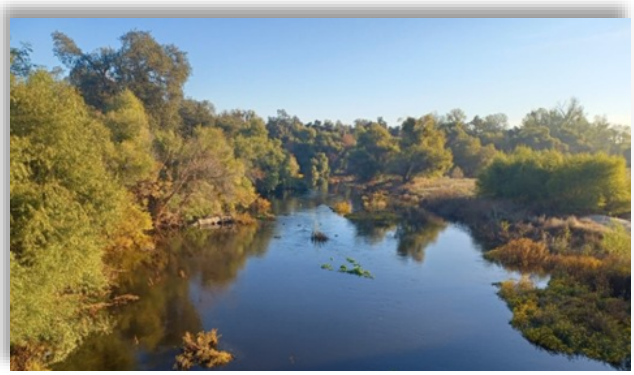
MERCED RIVER

FACT SHEET | November 2026

Analysis of 2022 Merced River Dry Conditions



July 28, 2022: Merced River completely dry at Hatfield Recreation Park, River Mile 1



October 19, 2022: Merced River at same location flowing at 239 cubic ft/second

What: **The Merced River ran dry in the summer and fall of 2022**

Where: **About 5 miles upstream from where it joins with the San Joaquin River**

When: **In the 3rd year of extreme drought for the Bay-Delta watershed**

Analysis: The State Water Board analyzed river flow and water diversion data for 62 miles of the river for July, August, and September 2022 to identify potential causes of dry river conditions. Every year water right holders must report how much water they used (diverted) from the river during the prior year. The analysis compared reported diversions to the amount of water in the river and found that the reported diversions matched or exceeded the available river flow in the months the river was dry.

Conclusions: **Reported water diversions alone were enough to cause the Merced River to go dry.** Unauthorized* diversions and groundwater depletion may have contributed, but available data does not indicate that these potential flow losses played a significant role in drying out the river.

Access the full analysis and related information at Merced River 2022 Dry Conditions Analysis

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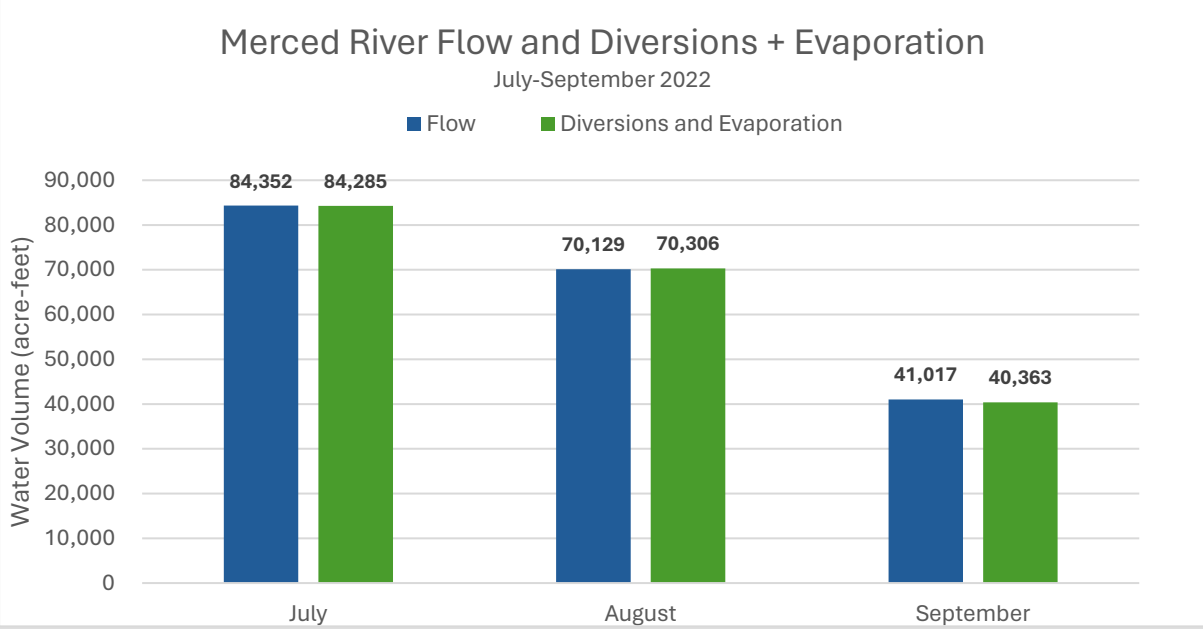
Key Findings

Diversions and evaporation can explain why the Merced River went dry from July - September 2022.

For 3 months in the Merced River:

- The amount of water flowing totaled 195,498 acre-feet.
- Diversion and evaporation totaled 194,954 acre-feet
  - Water right holder diversions totaled 194,006 acre-feet.
  - Evaporation totaled 948 acre-feet.

The difference between water that flowed into the Merced River and what was taken out or evaporated was only 544 acre-feet.



The Bottom Line

California's water-right priority system allowed all the normal flow of the Merced River to be diverted in 2022. The recently adopted Bay Delta Plan requires 40 percent of unimpaired flows in the Merced River during critical salmonid spawning seasons, but does not cover the late summer or fall when the dry river conditions occurred in 2022. Better water diversion and use accounting, along with other actions to protect and maintain flows, are key needs to ensure the lower Merced does not run dry in the future.

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BOARD RESPONSE

The State Water Board took additional actions in response to the Merced River drying, including:

- Provided technical assistance to diverters to ensure their measurement and reporting complies with regulations
- Investigated potentially unauthorized diversions.
- Issued 14 notices of violation.
- Brought 13 diverters into compliance.
- Continue community outreach and education.

DROUGHT CURTAILMENT

During drought, the State Water Board can sometimes restrict water diversions based on water rights priority. This process is called curtailment, and it is intended to protect senior water right holders and prevent unlawful diversion of water released from storage.

All appropriative water rights within the analysis area were curtailed in the summer of 2022. However, without a requirement to keep some water in the river, diversions by uncurtailed senior diverters were still sufficient to divert all available water from the Merced River.

Next Steps to Support Flowing Rivers

Improve Water Diversion and Flow Data

Help water right holders comply with measurement and reporting regulations to improve diversion data availability, accuracy, and reliability. Support maintenance of flow gages, channel cross sections, and rating curves and validate unimpaired flow estimates through voluntary efforts and regulatory actions. Conduct enforcement actions when and where necessary.

Protect Flows for Fish and Wildlife

Improve protection of fish and wildlife beneficial uses and maintain connected rivers through implementation of the Bay-Delta Plan and other actions as needed to protect and **maintain flows** throughout the year for the entire length of the river.

Support Watershed Partnerships

Coordinate with watershed groups, such as resource agencies, water suppliers, conservation groups, and the Lower Merced River Coalition, to **improve availability and quality of diversion data** and support local efforts to maintain continuous Merced River flows to the San Joaquin River.