

# Water Independence Through Innovation Reflects America's Great Outdoors

Enterprising, Efficient, Educational, Essential – These adjectives characterize and exemplify one of the most successful displays of innovation in the San Joaquin Valley.

A short 5 miles east of the Central Valley town of Mendota sits a seemingly abandoned sugar refinery. The Spreckels Sugar Co. operated the refinery from 1966 to 2008, when it closed due to shrinking sugar beet acreage. Looks, however, are deceiving. While the refinery machinery no longer processes sugar beets, the refinery structures conceal acres of a crop considerably more valuable than sugar beets. Water...



**Water Bank Pond with Spreckels Sugar Plant in the distance**

Much more is also not readily apparent; a strong commitment to the future...educating children on wildlife and wetlands protection, stewardship, the importance and value of water, and getting kids connected to the outdoors.

The Meyers Water Bank and Wildlife Project is an entrepreneurial, innovative and novel approach to private water management in the arid westside of the central San Joaquin Valley.

The owner, Marvin Meyers, an understated almond farmer, is a true pioneer in private water banking for farming. He owns a diversified farming operation in Firebaugh and has long been concerned about water availability on the westside. But, instead of relying on others to fulfill his water needs, he decided to do something about it.

Marvin got started in water banking in the late '90s, buying the Spreckels Sugar property and getting permits in place by 2002 to pump water from the nearby Mendota Pool into groundwater-recharge ponds behind the former sugar plant.

I contacted Marvin to get a tour of the 3,000-acre project in early June, and fortunately, I was able to catch the final school program for the year on my visit. There were 76 third grade students and four teachers from Wilson Elementary School in Sanger, CA, coming in for a 4-hour field trip. (More about that later.)

I was met at the sugar plant by Jason Dean, a former California Department of Fish and Game (DFG) warden who was hired to manage the water banking project and develop the educational component of the wildlife portion of the project. Jason explained how the project benefits not only Marvin's farming interests but also the community and school children in Fresno County. "We are educating future voters about water and its importance to agriculture, as well as about stewardship and protection of the land," said Jason.



**Marvin Meyers (left) speaks with Jason Dean**

It is clear that Jason is passionate about what he does.

The water banking project has been such a boon to wildlife that Meyers developed the wildlife project to ensure the continued protection of the wetlands and its inhabitants.

Jason also works closely with the Fresno County Department of Education to develop curriculum for the public schools and partners with them to provide a meaningful educational and recreational experience to thousands of schoolchildren.

### **Water Banker**

The Meyers water bank works in a similar fashion to your own bank account. A deposit is made and then withdrawn when needed in the future. Jason showed me six large ponds that are the depository for the water into the bank. Water banking is the process of storing surface water as groundwater. At the Meyers Project, water is pumped into a series of holding ponds where over time it percolates into the aquifer below where it stays until needed.

Water is pumped into the bank during times of good water availability. The water is withdrawn when normal sources of water are no longer available, such as during droughts. Jason explained that due to the geology of the area, the land is well suited for a water bank. Beneath the ponds lies 80-plus feet of sandy soil that is well suited to holding the deposited water.

The current capacity of the bank is about 35,000 acre-feet, enough water for the Meyers Farm to operate for 3 years with no additional sources.

Today the bank is nearly full, continuing to capture flood waters from the Kings River. Marvin will bank a full reservoir for the 2011 water year.

This water supply “insurance policy” clearly makes it possible for Marvin to operate his farm with a certainty that could make other farmers green with envy.

But, Marvin is a good neighbor. He has decided to nearly double his water bank to about 60,000 acre-feet to make it possible for his neighbors to take advantage of the same assurances that he enjoys. He is working with staff from our South Central California Area Office to finalize the environmental review process and permitting for the expansion. When complete, he will have added two more ponds and be able to store 20,000 – 25,000 acre-feet of water for his neighbors’ use.

### **Relationship with Reclamation**

Marvin attributes his success with the project to Reclamation. Although he has not taken a dollar of federal money to build the water bank, Marvin points to his relationship Reclamation and especially with the late former Commissioner John Keyes for his success. Marvin said that Keyes made several visits to the property to talk to him, to see the land, and to envision the project. With reverence he said, “Keyes loved this project.”

“The Bureau is the reason for my success -- the only reason.” Marvin went on to say that the SCCAO helped him get through all the regulatory requirements. “This is proof that public and private interests can work together to get something done,” he said. “Everyone just needs to cooperate.”



**Water Bank Intake**

He is quick to say that he has a great relationship with Regional Director Don Glaser and appreciates the continued support out of Sacramento. He is also quick to say how much he respects and admires the SCCAO staff.

### **Commitment to Sustainability**

The Meyers Farm and the Water Bank and Wildlife Project are operated entirely on solar panels. Marvin has replaced all of the diesel motors, generators and pumps with photo-voltaic (PV) fields that generate enough electricity to operate the pumping and irrigation system. These PV systems are proving to be a wise investment, not only financially but environmentally. He has reduced his fuel consumption for pumping and irrigating to zero, removed the expensive heavy machinery, reduced the likelihood of spills, removed permit requirements and most importantly in an area of poor air quality, has reduced emissions to zero.

He is also estimating that in about three and a half years, he should see a return on his investment for the PV fields.

### **Environmentalist**

Is it possible that a farmer on the westside can be an environmentalist? Of course! Farmers may be considered the first environmentalists...mostly out of necessity. Marvin however, has taken it a step or two further.

In 2006, Marvin's desire to rehabilitate wetlands on the Spreckels property became a reality. He had a concept for restoring a wetland habitat on the east side of the ponds in an area adjacent to the Fresno Slough. Previously used for cattle grazing, the land flooded during a particularly wet year. Shortly after, the wetland seed beds, long hibernating under the grazing activities, came to life. By chance and grace, a wetland was blooming.

Today, the wetland is vibrant with native plants, wildlife, *and* the sound of children. It is prime habitat for the endangered kit fox, giant garter snake and the threatened Swainson's hawk among dozens of other species of birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians. The area is on the Pacific Flyway and is also home to egrets, Great Blue Heron, mallards, red tail hawks, meadowlarks, avocets and stilts.

From my vantage point, along with the birds mentioned, I could see pond turtles, rabbits, squirrels, lizards, and other wildlife of all shapes and sizes.



**Wilson Elementary School - Sanger**



**Restored Wetlands**

It is truly a treasure of the San Joaquin Valley and a perfect location for the other priority for the project.

### **Outdoor Education**

Marvin has also dedicated his life to giving back. He has embraced President Obama's America's Great Outdoors (AGO) Initiative and proudly displays the AGO banners at the project. The President launched the AGO Initiative to develop a 21<sup>st</sup> Century conservation and recreation agenda. AGO takes as

its premise that lasting conservation solutions should rise from the American people – that the protection of our natural heritage is a non-partisan objective to be shared by all Americans.

AGO recognizes that many of the best ideas come from outside of Washington. Instead of dictating policies, this initiative turns to communities for local, grassroots conservation initiatives. Instead of growing bureaucracy, it calls for reworking inefficient policies and making the federal government a better partner with states, tribes, and local communities.



Jason Dean discussing the importance of water

The Meyers Project is a great example of AGO in action.

With Jason’s help, Marvin developed a first-class environmental education center for schools and kids of all ages. Partnering with the Fresno County Office of Education’s Scout Island Outdoor Education Center, Marvin and Jason have recruited docents from Scout Island to help prepare and deliver education programs that connect children to the outdoors.

On this day, Ann Perkins and Dave Bens were there to assist Jason with the visiting 76 kids. They used team building and cooperation exercises, lectures, and tactile games to deliver the message of stewardship, leadership and community through a program called C.I.T., for Confidence, Initiative and Teamwork.

As an added treat, Jason invited Cat Krosschel, Master Falconer, and Val Wallert, Assistant Falconer, along with their “friends” to speak with the children - a Great Horned Owl, Red Tail Hawk and a Peregrine Falcon were the hit of the day, thrilling the kids with every majestic move.

Jason ended the education program by giving a presentation on the water bank, its purpose, and its importance to agriculture. He focused his message on how precious water is and the need to protect and conserve it.



Cat Krosschel with a peregrine falcon

### Praise for the Project

At lunch I spoke with some of the kids and got their reaction to the day’s activities. The common theme was how much they loved the birds. But, more interestingly was that these third graders recognized that they were able to accomplish the goals of the cooperation exercise better as a team rather than as individuals. The day was a success!



Wilson Elementary School - Sanger

When I spoke with the teachers, they unanimously agreed that the program was outstanding, necessary and in line with the lesson plans for third graders. Wilson teacher Allison Norman said that without the help and assistance from Meyers, these field trips would not occur. Not only has Marvin built the educational center and hired staff to operate it, but he is also providing funds for

schools to bus in the students. Without his contribution, few, if any, of the students would be able to enjoy such an experience.

Clearly, this is a win-win for all involved.

Marvin watched and smiled at the children as they looked in awe at the bird demonstration. He is seeing the reality of his vision before his eyes.

As a testament to his innovation, in 2007, Marvin Meyers won Governor Schwarzenegger's "Environmental and Economic Leadership Award." In addition, he was honored in 2010 by the Greater Fresno Area Chamber of Commerce as the "Agriculturist of the Year" for designing and building the water bank.

The Meyers Project is located at 24900 W. Whitesbridge Rd, Mendota. For more information, Jason Dean can be reached at 559-694-1562 or [jason-mfi@sbcglobal.net](mailto:jason-mfi@sbcglobal.net).



**Meyers looks on as Cat shows-off the falcon**