

Why Coke cares about Mokelumne

By Alex Breitler
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It is 170 miles from the headwaters of the Mokelumne River to the Bay Area plant where Coca-Cola makes millions of bottled beverages every year.

But the world's largest soft drink company said it has a vested interest in that river.

And it has backed that up with a \$200,000 check.

Coke recently paid that sum to help the U.S. Forest Service restore fragile meadows in the Indian Valley area, nine miles southwest of Carson Pass in the Mokelumne watershed. The restored meadows will soak up more snowmelt and release it slowly over the course of the dry season, rather than all at once during the spring.

Why does Coke care about the Mokelumne? That bottle in your fridge might well be courtesy of the river, which the East Bay Municipal Utility District diverts into aqueducts burrowing directly beneath Stockton and through the Delta.

Coke said the meadow restoration will offset about 90 percent of the water in the drinks produced at its San Leandro plant. That's part of a bigger plan to be "water neutral" across Earth by 2020.

"It does cost money, but for us we consider it an investment into our long-term sustainability," said Jon Radtke, Coke's water resource manager. "It's a business decision for us. We need (the water), the whole community needs it."

The company has been accused at times of depleting water resources in the course of producing billions of drinks.

It takes 1.75 liters of water to produce a 1-liter beverage. The extra water is needed to sanitize the bottles, Radtke said.

Coke is not pledging to offset all of the water it uses, but rather all of the water that directly goes into its beverages. Radtke said the company is about 35 percent of the way to that goal.

Far from the plant, the meadows at Indian Valley had been degraded over the years from both human activities and natural conditions. The stream through the meadow had eroded, and the groundwater level had dropped.

Restoring the meadows will replenish about 80 million gallons of groundwater a year - or 300 million liters, in terms soft drink consumers can relate to.

That's also roughly enough water for 250 families for one year.

The Pine Grove-based Foothill Conservancy, which advocates for the Mokelumne, had long supported the restoration of Indian Valley. Conservancy President Katherine Evatt said she was pleased the money came through, not only from Coke but also the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation.

"If people want to invest in watersheds, and I'm sure everyone has their own reason for doing so, but it's all for the good as long as the environmental goals are good and sound," Evatt said.

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