



## Working Together to Achieve More

The Merced river runs from the high country of Yosemite National Park to the San Joaquin River. On its journey it traverses national forests, small towns, privately owned lands, as well as other state and federal lands. People from around the world travel to the Merced River to take advantage of recreational opportunities such as kayaking, fishing and hiking. The watershed also has a wide variety of land uses, including grazing, mining in the lower watershed, farming, and many more. The river contains several dams that provide water for agriculture and urban areas. With such a diverse watershed, coordination would be a challenge for any group or agency. However, two watershed coordinators, funded through DOC's pilot watershed coordinator program, are working to bring together the entire upper and lower Merced River for a healthier watershed and to explore new funding sources for improvement projects.

Katy Duffin works for the Mariposa RCD as the Upper Merced River Watershed Coordinator. The RCD is using her coordination efforts to develop a watershed protection strategy. The primary goal for the Upper Merced River Watershed Coordinator is to bring all of the various stakeholders together from both private and public sectors, and develop a cooperative alliance. The alliance will give stakeholders the opportunity to address watershed issues, concerns, and share knowledge.

Further down the river, Teri Murrison works as the Lower Merced River Watershed Coordinator for the East Merced RCD. Her tasks include coordinating the Merced River stakeholders group, implementing a water quality monitoring program and other watershed improvement efforts.

The two coordinators began working independently with Jerry Progner of the USDA NRCS who told them, "they oughta get to know one another!" They realized he was right! They found working together is more fun and that both RCDs could benefit from the partnership.



*Continued on Page 4*

***On the left***

***Upper Merced River in Spring***

Many a joyful stream is born in the Sierras, but no one can sing like the Merced. In childhood, high on the mountains, her silver thread is a moving melody; of sublime Yosemite she is the voice...  
John Muir, 1872

## INTERNAL CONTROLS

Every organization, including RCDs, must be aware of the importance of internal controls. Internal controls are those policies, procedures, techniques, and mechanisms that are implemented to reduce a district's risks. For example, RCDs may implement internal controls designed to prevent equipment thefts, eliminate unauthorized purchases, or ensure that only approved information is distributed. They provide directors with reasonable assurance that assets are safeguarded; transactions are carried out in compliance with the directors' authorizations; records and reports are reliable; laws, regulations, and policies are adhered to; and that resources are efficiently and effectively managed.

Unfortunately, many boards of directors do not consider controls in their decision making process until a problem such as theft arises. At that point, the district loses its ability to be proactive and flexible and instead is forced to react to events as they unfold. Often, a district begins implementing controls piecemeal, designed to minimize specific risks, rather than establishing an overall strategy of controls. This approach creates a fragmented internal control structure that is less effective and more costly. As the proverbial saying goes, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." Clearly, that is the case here.

The goal is to minimize risk while keeping costs and administrative bureaucracy to a minimum. Therefore, an RCD should not implement all possible controls but should implement only those that are suitable for their organization. RCDs should include basic internal control requirements in their district policy manuals. All employees must understand the importance of internal controls and what procedures must be followed to ensure compliance.



Internal control consists of five interrelated components: control environment, risk assessment, control activities, information and communication, and monitoring. A board of directors is responsible for setting the tone or control environment within its district. It is crucial that district staff understand their board's commitment to established control policies because the control environment is the foundation on which the other four control components are built. The second component, risk assessment, requires that the district scrutinize itself and identify areas of risk. Once identified, the next step is for

the RCD to determine how to manage those risks. Although, numerous internal controls could solve the problem, a district should select the control activities that best meet the RCD's goals and objectives. Control activities include a wide range of diverse activities, such as approvals, authorizations, segregation of duties, access to assets, supervision, verifications, reconciliations, performance reviews, security measures, and the production of records and documentation. The fourth component focuses on identifying, capturing, and exchanging information. It also emphasizes the need for effective communication involving both written materials and verbal interactions. It is important that the organization consider these factors when implementing internal controls. Finally, RCDs should reevaluate their internal controls periodically. Environments are constantly changing so what was effective in the past may no longer be adequate.

Most RCDs have acquired computers, credit cards, and other valuable assets. Credit cards pose a unique problem. An RCD must ensure that the card's use is restricted and that sufficient controls exist to eliminate unauthorized purchases and if they do occur, a system must be in place to notify the RCD before too much damage is done. Computers must be protected from unauthorized use and viruses. Some controls might include periodically using anti-virus software and also ensuring that information is protected by passwords. Other assets, such as digital cameras, VCRs, software programs, chippers, vehicles, GPS units, cell phones, etc. are subject to misuse or even theft. RCDs must implement sufficient controls to prevent the loss of assets and to minimize potential lawsuits because of misuse. Simple controls may include locking doors, requiring employees to attend classes on how to operate specific types of equipment or requiring employees to sign out equipment using a roster.

Every RCD must evaluate their own organization and implement those controls that meet their needs. There is not one solution for everyone. It takes time, effort, commitment, and diligence. Directors must establish an environment where internal controls are emphasized and not simply an afterthought. The potential for theft, inefficiency, liability or adverse publicity requires action. It may be prudent for each district to seek professional assistance in developing a comprehensive internal control program. Can your RCD afford to do otherwise?

*Written by Robert Shun, RCD Assistance Program Grant Manager*

## ***Understanding CEQA***

The basic goal of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) (Pub. Res. Code §21000 *et seq.*) is to develop and maintain a high-quality environment now and in the future, while the specific goals of CEQA are for California's public agencies to:

- 1) identify the significant environmental effects of their actions; and, either
- 2) avoid those significant environmental effects, where feasible; or
- 3) mitigate those significant environmental effects, where feasible.

CEQA applies to "projects" proposed to be undertaken or requiring approval by state and local government agencies.

Projects are activities which have the potential to have a physical impact on the environment and may include the enactment of zoning ordinances, the issuance of conditional use permits and the approval of tentative subdivision maps.

**Where a project requires approvals from more than one public agency, CEQA requires one of these public agencies to serve as the "lead agency." A lead agency must complete the environmental review process required by CEQA. The most basic steps of the environmental review process are:**

- 1) Determine if the activity is a project subject to CEQA;
- 2) Determine if the project is exempt from CEQA;
- 3) Perform an Initial Study to identify the environmental impacts of the project and determine whether the identified impacts are "significant".

## Working Together *(Continued from page 1)*

Teri and Katy share the same important goal of improving and safeguarding the health of the Merced River.

Both the Upper and Lower Merced River stakeholder groups have benefited from the partnership. Teri assists Katy during her stakeholder meetings and Katy assists Teri with meetings in the lower Merced. Not only does this make their job easier, it also provides stakeholders the opportunity to learn about issues in both portions of the watershed. The coordinators are currently discussing bringing together the stakeholders from the upper and lower watersheds for a tour of the entire watershed. Such an event would be an excellent outreach and public relations opportunity for both districts.



*Katy and Teri give a presentation about their work in the watershed*

Teri and Katy have also worked together to find funding that would benefit both portions of the watershed. Currently, they are working to find financial support for a watershed-based visitors center in El Portal. The visitors center will include information about both the Upper and Lower Merced River. Katy and Teri are collaborating with a landowner in Merced to organize a fundraiser for the center.

Both RCDs recognize the value of obtaining baseline water quality data for the entire Merced. As a result, Katy and Teri are working towards implementing a citizen water quality monitoring program for the whole river. The baseline data will give the RCDs a good place to start addressing water quality issues. Both coordinators realize that the upper and lower watersheds are interdependent, and therefore, any solution addressing issues within either area must consider the entire watershed. The partnership formed by the coordinators will ensure that restoration efforts are implemented with the entire watershed in mind.

Mariposa and East Merced RCDs are good examples of how RCDs can achieve more by working together. Because of their partnership, they are able to reduce the duplication of efforts within their watersheds. They are working together to obtain funding projects that will benefit the entire watershed and they are helping bring together stakeholders from both portions of a sizable watershed. On top of the benefits to the watershed that have resulted from the partnership, Teri Murrison says they have, “discovered that working together on things is more fun for everyone involved!”

## **RCD Guidebook Highlight: *The Brown Act and closed sessions***

As a public agency, RCDs must comply with the Ralph M. Brown Act. Frequently public agencies are tempted to hold closed sessions simply because it may be permitted. However, the best way to avoid a Brown Act violation is to avoid closed sessions unless they are absolutely necessary. For instance, the personnel exception detailed in section 54957 of the Government Code, specifically prohibits discussion or action on employee compensation, except for a disciplinary reduction in pay. In other words, if you want to give your employee a raise, the discussion is **not** a valid reason for a closed session.

When there is a valid reason for holding a closed session, the meeting agenda must indicate which portion of the Brown Act allows for the closed session. Furthermore, the agenda must contain a brief description of what will be discussed in the closed session even if the board does not plan to take any action. Once the board concludes with the closed discussion, they must reconvene to an open meeting and discuss what took place during the closed session. The Brown Act contains many other rules that all RCDs directors should be familiar with. The full text of the Act as well as a helpful summary can be found in the RCD Guidebook, Appendices F and G. Remember, if you're in doubt about the Brown Act or any other law pertaining to RCDs don't hesitate to ask your lawyer, the RCD Assistance Program staff or the CARCD.

***Directors have a responsibility to keep up to date on rules and regulations that apply to districts. To read the full text of the Brown Act, Division 9, or other regulations that apply to RCDs such as the Open Meeting Law, simply visit the official CA legislative information website at: <http://www.leginfo.ca.gov>. The site is a useful tool to find out about existing or pending legislation.***

## ***Understanding CEQA***

*Continued from page 3*

Based on its findings of significance, the lead agency prepares one of the following environmental review documents:

- a) Negative Declaration if it finds no significant impacts;
- b) Mitigated Negative Declaration if it finds significant impacts but revises the project to avoid or mitigate those significant impacts;
- c) Environmental Impact Report (EIR) if it finds significant impacts.

While there is no ironclad definition of significance, Article 5 of the state CEQA Guidelines provides criteria to lead agencies to help them determine whether a project may have significant effects. The purpose of an EIR is to provide state and local agencies and the general public detailed information on the potentially significant environmental effects that a proposed project is likely to have on the community. Also, the EIR must list ways in which the significant environmental effects may be minimized or indicate alternatives to the project.

**Editors note:** This article is based on information obtained at the Resources Agency CEQA web page, <http://ceres.ca.gov/ceqa/index.html>

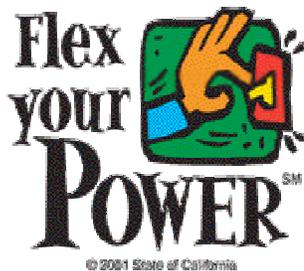
Department of Conservation

801 K Street, MS 13-71  
Sacramento CA 95814

Phone: 916-324-0774

Fax: 916-327-3430

Email: [rcd@consvr.ca.gov](mailto:rcd@consvr.ca.gov)



**Now available:** RCD Directors' Handbook (includes RCD Guidebook 2000 on compact disc). Contact RCD program staff at 916-324-0774 to get your copy!

[www.consvr.ca.gov/  
dlrp/RCD/index.htm](http://www.consvr.ca.gov/dlrp/RCD/index.htm)

*Edited by: Jenny Pickel*

The RCD Outlook newsletter is intended to provide RCDs with helpful tips and updates on RCD work statewide. If you would like to be added to the mailing list please feel free to call the RCD program staff at 916-324-0774 or send an email to [rcd@consvr.ca.gov](mailto:rcd@consvr.ca.gov).