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Stanislaus River spring pulse flows reach 3,000 cfs; public advised to use caution near the river

As is typical each spring, flows in the Stanislaus River are running high and will remain so throughout the rest of the month.

The flows doubled to about 3,000 cfs beginning at 4 a.m. on May 10. Boaters, rafters, fishermen and others accessing the river are strongly encouraged to use caution. According to professional rafting guides, these are not safe times to be on the river.

The water is cold, fast and its currents are unyielding. Inexperienced rafters often get pushed further into brushy riverbanks, which creates hazardous conditions most people are not accustomed to. If you must go near the river, it is advised to wear a life jacket at all times.

Still, this year's pulse flows are less than the spring of 2017. Then, after a historically wet winter, daily flows reached as high as 4,500 cfs and the same precautionary advisories were in place.

Spring pulse flows are part of a coordinated water management system involving the federal Bureau of Reclamation, which operates New Melones Reservoir on the Stanislaus River, and the South San Joaquin and Oakdale irrigation districts, which have historic water rights on the river.

The flows are intended to help juvenile salmon – the product of last fall's spawning season -- begin their perilous journey down the river, through the Delta and, eventually, to the Pacific Ocean. Those who survive will be among the adults who return in three years to spawn, die and begin the cycle again.

The year's flows are being augmented by additional water provided by the irrigation districts.

These augmented flows provide additional outmigration incentives for young salmon as well as an opportunity for West Side farmers to use this surface water for irrigation, reducing groundwater use. Water districts on the San Joaquin Valley's West Side are dependent upon the federal and state systems. This year, as frequently occurs, they will receive less than their full annual allocations.

At least through Memorial Day weekend, we encourage anyone who wants to enjoy recreational activities on or near the Stanislaus or Tuolumne rivers to use regionally managed parks at Woodward, Tulloch, Modesto and Turlock reservoirs, at least until river flows subside to safer levels.