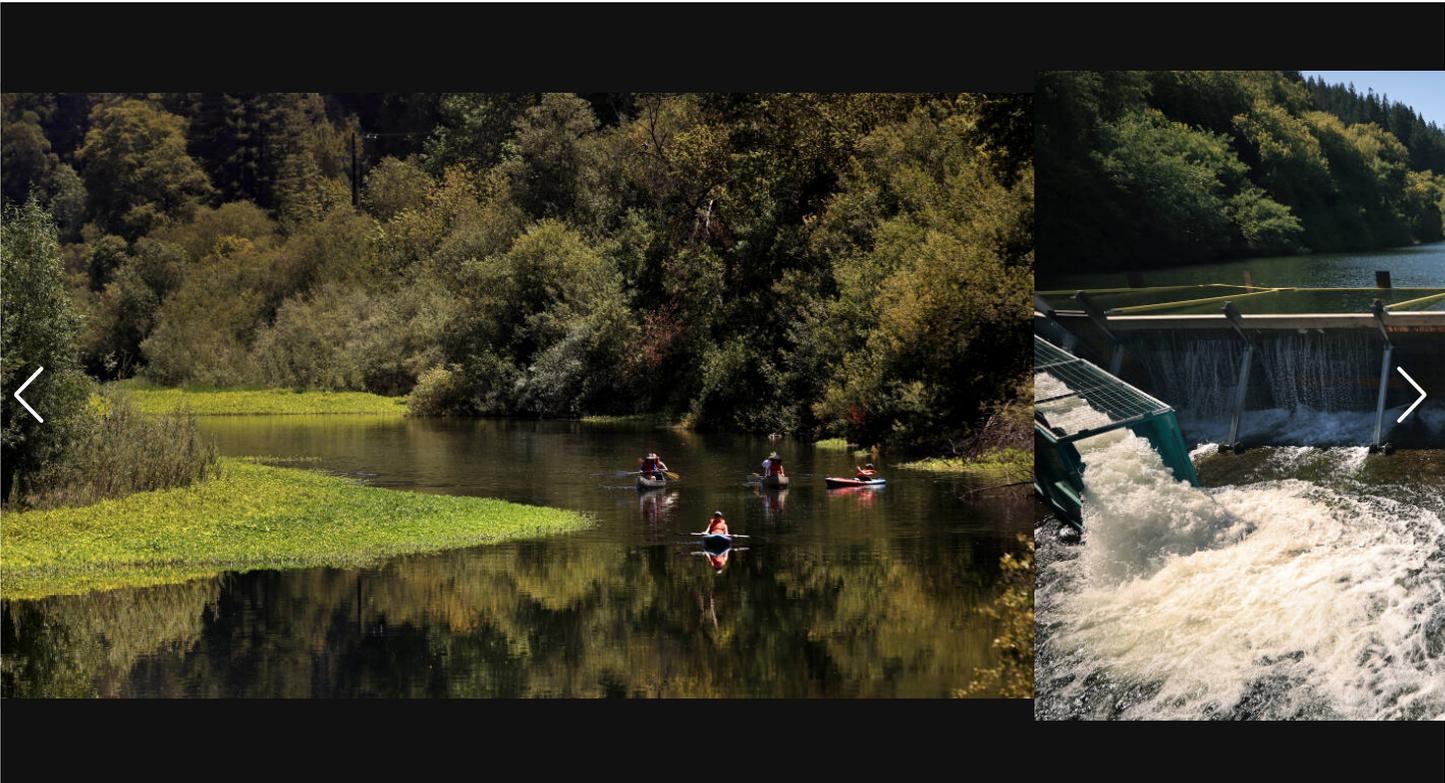


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# Brand sought for the Russian River in hopes of inspiring stronger stewardship



SLIDE 1 OF 4

Kayakers maneuver through the placid flow of the Russian River near Odd Fellows Park, east of Rio Nido, Saturday, July 10, 2021. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat) 2021

MARY CALLAHAN  
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT  
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For 50-plus years, the iconic "Keep Tahoe Blue" slogan has beckoned visitors to the crystal clear waters of California's largest lake while inspiring them to safeguard it against overuse and abuse.

Officials and community advocates from around Sonoma County now hope to make the same kind of magic on behalf of the Russian River through a campaign spurring interest and engagement in its ecological health while highlighting its value as a tourist destination, recreational hub and critical natural resource.

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"We wanted to really showcase this amazing resource that we have in Sonoma County and inspire people to protect it," while at the same time galvanizing people "around a natural resource that's under threat," said Sonoma County Supervisor Lynda Hopkins, the board chairwoman.

The county has recently contracted with a Healdsburg-based consultant to develop a brand identity and marketing campaign for the entire watershed. It is meant to integrate solution-oriented messaging about existing challenges — [including the severe drought straining the river like never before](#) — with tourist-oriented promotions and expressions of regional pride.

"I think we want to create a unifying identity — something that people can rally behind — whether that's a simple tagline or whether that's a new perspective or appreciation of the river," said Ryan O'Halloran, partner at Catch Creative, which has been contracted for the project.

The agency's work will be seen on signs, in social media and other venues.

It also is expected to include merchandising for an eco-friendly line of commonly needed, wearable and reusable items like water bottles, T-shirts, towels, bags and other items. Some merchandise might replace single-use products that routinely contribute to the litter stream, officials said.

There are plans to tie in online promotions and to strengthen the internet presence of small businesses, particularly in the lower river corridor, which has been hard hit by recent flooding in addition to wildfire evacuations, power outages and COVID pandemic shutdowns.

Born out of Hopkins' west county district in the aftermath of February 2019 floods, which left millions of dollars in damage in lower river communities, the Russian River Revitalization project evolved from a series of economic development and neighborhood meetings, said Hopkins' field representative, Elise Weiland.

It is funded by \$110,000 in federal flood relief funds, with the potential for another \$50,000, as needed to implement plans.

Major issues have included chronic littering of river beaches and the tension between sustaining an economy dependent on luring people to the region and the risk of overburdening a watershed vital for [water supply](#), wildlife habitat and recreational opportunities, Weiland said.

A key theme of the new project, said Hopkins, is "creating a positive sense of ownership."

"How do you create an ethic around visitorship? she said. "How to you ensure the tourists that visit here want to leave it better than they found it, as opposed to Spring Break: Get drunk, and leave it for someone else to clean it up? How do we create that stewardship culture?"

There also were concerns about illegal camping, maintaining healthy fish habitat and how best to educate would-be volunteers about what they could do to help — raising larger questions about the need for a framework for people to collaborate on regional issues, Weiland said.

Eventually, Hopkins and Supervisor James Gore, whose districts take in the middle Russian River watershed, decided to make the campaign a joint project involving members of the Russian River Confluence, [a stakeholder working group launched in 2017](#) to promote a "one watershed" approach to a healthier, more resilient river.

The project will be developed in collaboration with confluence members, which so far number 22. They include county agencies such as the Open Space District and Regional Parks, resource conservation districts, land trusts, tribes and nonprofits including LandBaths and the Russian Riverkeeper.

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Many already take part in efforts to rid the region of litter, hosting regular cleanup events and spreading the word. Regional Parks, for instance, has faced an enduring battle against litter-filled beaches that was more pronounced than ever during the pandemic, when shelter-in-place restrictions drove enormous crowds outdoors, to public spaces last year, said David Robinson, parks manager.

“We probably had one and a half times the amount of trash than the previous summer,” even though there was more trash pickup service, he said.

Of particular issue, he and Hopkins said, are the number of inflatable flotation devices abandoned at river beaches, particularly Forestville’s Sunset Beach, a popular stopping point for folks floating down from points up river.

The department now is installing new signs developed by the Colorado-based, nonprofit Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics at river and ocean beaches reminding people to dispose of waste in trash cans until they are full, and then to take anything else with them.

“It’s kind of a pack it in, pack it out mentality,” Robinson said.

The confluence was intended to be a jumping off point for public education and engagement, though it was cut short by all-consuming responses to successive wildfires and other emergencies, including the pandemic.

It has been dormant since, though officials hope to reboot it now, starting with the Russian River Revitalization project.

“We mean this not to be a short-term effort,” said Weiland. “We mean this to develop in the same way the Keep Tahoe Blue did. We mean this to be an iconic campaign.”

More information is available at [russianriverconfluence.org](http://russianriverconfluence.org) and at [russianriverrevitalization.org](http://russianriverrevitalization.org), which includes a survey through which locals and visitors can weigh in on issues and areas they would like to see improved.

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