



GREG REES

The Committee advocated for additional Mono Basin stream segments to be included as eligible for Wild & Scenic River designation in the revised Forest Land Management Plan.

the Conway grade adjacent to Conway Ranch, as well as install rumble strips, correct a substandard curve, and lengthen the tire chain installation area. At times this stretch of highway experiences high wind speeds, which makes it more prone to traffic accidents. Widening the shoulders will provide additional room to maneuver when wind events occur.

The Committee has already submitted preliminary scoping comments focused on the revegetation of cut and fill slopes. Caltrans and the Committee have learned a lot from revegetating the Rockfall Project, and we are encouraging Caltrans to model future revegetation plans on these successfully proven methods.

The Committee plans to meet with Caltrans on-site this summer to inform the draft environmental document scheduled for release in January 2020. Project construction is scheduled for spring of 2023.

### **Forest Plan objection process nears completion**

The Inyo National Forest Land Management Plan development process is nearing resolution. A final procedural phase of the process is the objection phase, during which interested parties

who previously filed comments on the plan could object to specific findings of the draft final decision. The Committee has been involved in the public plan revision process since 2014 with an eye on the parts of the plan that affect the Mono Basin.

Unfortunately, the plan draft record of decision issued in August 2018 did not include a number of Mono Basin stream segments that meet Wild & Scenic River eligibility. The Committee made the case for Wild & Scenic River eligibility for portions of Rush, Lee

Vining, Mill, Parker, and Walker creeks. These creeks have made, and continue to make, great restoration progress and possess “Outstandingly Remarkable Values” (ORV) under US Forest Service criteria that allow for eligibility.

The objection meetings with US Forest Service staff in mid-February were the final opportunity for interested parties to provide input on topics that were formally objected to in the draft plan. Committee staff presented images and details demonstrating how Mono Basin creek segments met ORV criteria. After the presentation, reviewing US Forest Service staff from the Inyo and Region Five indicated they were optimistic about including additional stream segments for eligibility. The outcome of the objections and a final record of decision are expected this year.

### **Mill Creek return ditch improved**

Southern California Edison (SCE) is continuing to look for creative solutions to comply with an 11-year-old hydropower settlement, namely returning water to Mill Creek in accordance with long-established and adjudicated water rights. The Mill Creek return ditch, which returns water back to Mill Creek after it passes through the hydropower plant, is a

*Continued on page 10*



ROBBIE DI PAOLLO

The Mill Creek return ditch is a critical piece of infrastructure used to return water back to Mill Creek after it passes through SCE’s hydropower plant.

critical infrastructure component. SCE tested the return ditch in 2017 and then again last year (see Winter & Spring 2018 *Mono Lake Newsletter*). Both test flows and associated monitoring periods have revealed opportunities for structural improvements, which SCE has made, increasing the capacity and reliability of the system.

SCE is planning to use the return ditch again this year in a good-faith effort to return at least a portion of the water rights associated with Mill Creek. However, the current capacity of the ditch still falls well below the size needed to return all of Mill's legal allocation of water. The Committee and five other agencies and stakeholders, including SCE, are looking at alternatives to make up the shortfall and begin Mill Creek's long-awaited restoration process.

### **Preserving a historic house**

The Committee has worked for many years to protect a land parcel on Mono Lake's west shore from proposed extensive development (see

Fall 2007 *Mono Lake Newsletter*). The solution is the transfer of the property to the Inyo National Forest for public ownership, a long process that will soon be complete. But what will happen to the small house that currently sits on the site? Its long history dates back many decades, making it a home of local significance, although not an officially designated historical building.

The Committee is helping our friends at the Mono Basin Historical Society with a plan to relocate the building to Hess Park in Lee Vining to expand the existing museum. In December we connected Mammoth Mountain, which currently owns the property, with the Historical Society to develop a plan to move the house. It's not often that you see a building driving down Highway 395, but by summer that may be exactly what happens.

### **Government shutdown**

The partial federal government shutdown from December 22, 2018 to January 25, 2019 was the longest in

US history, affecting many dedicated federal employees and their families. In the Eastern Sierra, the US Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and National Park Service were all affected, and visitor centers were shuttered. The Mono Basin National Forest Scenic Area Visitor Center was already closed for the winter, but South Tufa remained open and accessible throughout the shutdown. Thanks to Mono Lake Tufa State Natural Reserve staff, Committee volunteers, and a mindful public, the South Tufa bathrooms were kept clean and trash cans emptied.

Regular business between the public and the Inyo National Forest was halted during the shutdown. The Inyo National Forest Land Management Plan objection meetings were canceled (later rescheduled), annual special-use permitting was suspended, and seasonal federal employee hiring delayed. While the visiting public was not severely inconvenienced in the region due to the timing, the shutdown

*Continued on page 11*

## Fixing the pipes at DeChambeau Ponds



BARTSIE MILLER

**T**he DeChambeau Ponds support migratory waterfowl and wildlife on the north shore of Mono Lake. A historic artesian well, which is a relic of an unsuccessful oil drilling effort, provides year-round warm water—but the piping system has failed in recent years. Committee staff recently visited the site with local residents, Friends of the Inyo, and the US Forest Service to explore possible fixes to benefit the ponds.