

Legendary California Fishery and Water Quality Activist Bill Jennings Dies at Age 79

We at CSPA are all terribly saddened by the loss of our leader Bill Jennings. It is particularly hard to lose a figure who in so many ways was larger than life. People have asked about a memorial. We will plan one when we can hold it safely in an outdoor venue. We thank everyone for the many condolences and notes of concern we have received.



The California Sportfishing Protection Alliance and the fish of California lost Bill Jennings on December 27, 2022. Above all, Bill was a relentless activist. For over 40 years, he used the law, meticulously documented data, an irascible wit, and a stinging pen to defend and protect his beloved Bay-Delta Estuary and all the rivers that feed it.

Bill was chairman of CSPA's board of directors since 1988 and its executive director since 2005. He led CSPA in decades of battles to increase flows into the Sacramento – San Joaquin Delta and through to San Francisco Bay. He campaigned tirelessly against multiple incarnations of canals and tunnels around the Delta. Through his "Watershed Enforcers" program, Bill chased down stormwater, wastewater, and agricultural polluters all over the state.

Bill went through hundreds of regulatory processes at the State Water Resources Control Board, regional water quality control boards, and other agencies. He showed up, presented data, and demanded solutions. Bill was swift and sure with litigation when agencies fell short.

Born in Kentucky in 1943, Bill grew up in northern Kentucky and southern Ohio. He attended the University of Tennessee, where he became active in the Civil Rights Movement. For several years during the Vietnam War, Bill was also a leading figure in draft resistance in Tennessee.

As a young man, Bill spent many years traveling back and forth across the country, selling pipe tobacco products out of his van. He spent several summers in West Yellowstone, Montana, where he learned to fly fish. Later he spent many summers camping in Yosemite Valley.

Bill settled in Stockton in the '80s, where he opened and ran a store that doubled as a fly fishing and tobacconist shop.

In the late '80s, Bill helped form and became president of the Committee to Save the Mokelumne River. Following multiple fish kills in Camanche Reservoir and the lower

Mokelumne River, he initiated a dizzying series of actions at the State Water Board, San Joaquin County Superior Court, and the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. As a result, the East Bay Municipal Utility District cleaned up the Penn (copper) Mine, increased river flows in the lower Mokelumne River by a factor of five, and added oxygen to the water supply of an upgraded Mokelumne River Fish Hatchery. Today, the Mokelumne River is one of the most important sources of salmon in California.

From 1995-2005, Bill was the head of Deltakeeper, which deployed several vessels to monitor water quality throughout the Delta. Bill and his team analyzed many of the collected samples in the kitchen and other rooms set up in Bill's waterfront office and home. The data they collected also provided evidence for regulatory and legal actions. In 2005, Deltakeeper dissolved, and Bill became CSPA's executive director. Under his leadership, CSPA expanded its Watershed Enforcers program, carrying 5-10 water quality lawsuits at any given time. The program has cleaned up dozens of wastewater and industrial stormwater sources of pollution. It has also generated millions of dollars in settlement fees that have provided grant funding to watershed, fishing, and environmental nonprofit organizations.

Bill led CSPA in developing extensive evidentiary records in the State Water Board's 2010 Delta flow criteria hearings and in 2015-2018 hearings on the proposed "twin tunnels" that would have diverted water under the Delta. He also led two sets of lawsuits against the State Water Board's changes to flow and water temperature requirements during droughts; two of these lawsuits are ongoing.

For over three decades, Bill had his finger on the pulse of California water politics and policy. He was known throughout the broader California water community as blunt and gruff, but personally congenial. He was a board member of the California Water Impact Network and served for many years on the Restore the Delta board.

Bill was also very well known in his home town of Stockton and throughout San Joaquin County, where he was active in socially progressive causes.

Bill received countless awards and honors. He was recognized by San Joaquin County, the California State Legislature, and the U.S. Congress. He received awards from the California Department of Fish and Game and the American Fisheries Society. He was recognized formally and informally by many fishing groups, and spoke at many public functions. In early 2022, Bill was elected to the California Outdoors Hall of Fame.

Bill leaves an enduring and unique legacy of protecting California fisheries, habitat, and water quality. The breadth and depth of his achievements are unlikely to be equaled.

Contributions in Bill's memory can be made to the Stockton-based organization he directed, the California Sportfishing Protection Alliance, whose mailing address is P.O. Box 1061, Groveland, CA 95321. [Donations can also be made to CSPA online here.](#)



California Sportfishing Protection Alliance
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