

Ditch Conveyance System

Located near the center of California, in Tuolumne County, a unique bit of history can be found. Starting at an elevation of 3800 feet near the community of Twain Harte, making its way down to Jamestown at 1100 feet, is the Tuolumne Utilities District Ditch System. This system is made up of a series of open ditches and wooden flumes — that is, man-made water channels raised above ground, similar to a train trestle, leading to different locations. This District has 13 ditches that stretch 74 miles within the County.

Originating as part of the California Gold Rush of the 1850s the ditches were used to bring water for gold mining first for hydraulic mining and then for hard rock mining. Today the ditches transport water to most of the area's water treatment plants and to agricultural users.

Recognized as a significant part of the Tuolumne Utilities District and of the County, the Ditch System Sustainability Plan was developed in order to manage the system so its multiple uses can be sustained and protect their historic value. Considered eligible for the National Register of Historic Places, the ditches are unique because they function as a water delivery system that provides other benefits. They provide a near level recreational path in a variety of ecosystems and support a large amount of wildlife and wildlife habitats, including wetlands. Additionally, the ditches are used for wildland fire protection and provide a sense of history due to the link to the Gold Rush. Water channels such as these may not be very commonplace anymore, but those in Tuolumne County remain valuable, and clearly portray water's many uses and benefits not only for communities, but also the surrounding environment.

Story and photos courtesy of the Tuolumne Utilities District staff.

