

What's good for Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta is good for the state

Monterey County Herald, 8-4-10

Don't fall for the "new dust bowl" references and the other hype from California's great interior.

The new report from the State Water Resources Control Board about excessive water diversions from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta is good news for the fishing industry, San Francisco Bay and California's overall water quality.

By reporting that current diversions threaten not only the Delta smelt but the chinook salmon, steelhead and other fish important to the commercial and recreational fishing industries of California's coast, the board put in writing what was already obvious.

Despite the well-financed PR campaign being waged by San Joaquin Valley agribusiness, it isn't a case of "fish or farms." It's more a case of "fish or sprawl." Corporate farms of the western San Joaquin Valley now buy a sizable share of the Delta's water at deeply discounted prices—subsidized by federal taxpayers—and resell it at plump profits to the developers of Southern California subdivisions and high rises.

To keep the Delta habitable for fish stock long term, the Water Resources Control Board staff concluded in the long-awaited study that the export of Delta water needs to be cut in half. Accomplishing that still would provide ample water for irrigation, but would set off one of the great water wars of our times, pitting the most powerful players in water politics against a relatively ragtag collection of environmental and fishing industry groups. It is a safe bet the mega-farmers of Fresno and Kern counties aren't going to give up a drop they don't have to.

Yes, this is the same State Water Resources Control Board that is poised to curtail diversions from the Carmel River to protect the river and its inhabitants. Its principal task is to protect the water supply and related habitat, and it takes a decidedly environmentalist approach. What's good for the Carmel River is good for the Delta, and what's good for the Delta is good for California. All of it.

There are those, such as Fresno Congressman Jim Costa, who accuse the board of taking extremist positions. Referring to the report released last week, Costa said, "This kind of misinformation serves as fodder for extreme environmentalists and critics of our valley who aim to cut off our water."

There is some truth to his view in that the water board report amounts to an environmental wish list. Political and economic realities will never enable California's water managers to restore the full, original flow of water north to south.

But the Delta and the rivers that feed off it are an integral part of the water supply for much of California, and voices other than Big Ag's need to join the discussion about how the resource is appropriated. It is a coastal issue just as much as it is a valley issue.