

Delta water users dismiss call for steep cutbacks

Mike Taugher, Bay Area News Group, 8-4-10

SACRAMENTO -- A powerful state board on Tuesday for the first time adopted criteria defining how much water must flow through the Delta to the Bay to maintain a healthy ecosystem.

The criteria, while nonbinding, are based on findings that showed the state's farms and cities are using far too much Delta water, results that could shift how policymakers balance the needs of the environment and the state's farms and cities.

"This is something that some of us have been awaiting for more than two decades," said Zeke Grader, executive director of a trade group for commercial salmon fishermen, the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations.

Grader and several environmentalists said the report's central conclusion -- that significantly more water must be left to flow through the Delta -- was unsurprising given evidence developed during the 1980s and 1990s during similar proceedings that were scuttled under political pressure.

"This doesn't have the (regulatory force) those other two processes had, but the science has finally been liberated," Grader said.

Water agencies, especially those that rely on Delta pumps near Tracy, sought to dismiss the report as pie in the sky.

It was "an interesting theoretical exercise" and "not a useful resource" said the State Water Contractors, an association that represents the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, the Kern County Water Agency and a handful of water agencies in the Bay Area.

Thomas Birmingham, general manager of the Westlands Water District, the nation's largest irrigated farm district, called the report "immaterial" and urged board members not to adopt it.

The "flow criteria report" adopted by the State Water Resources Control Board was not meant to balance economic needs with that of the environment. Rather, it was meant to determine how much water must flow through the Delta to maintain a healthy ecosystem given the array of environmental threats there.

That information is expected to help guide others who are trying to strike a balance between the environment and economic needs, including a committee of water officials, environmentalists and regulators developing a Bay Delta conservation plan that considers digging water-carrying tunnels beneath the Delta.

One environmentalist said the report would promote a better balance.

Although water agencies have long been able to define how much water they need, the report marks the first time specific numbers could be put on the environment's side of the scales, said Gary Bobker, program director at The Bay Institute.

The study found that about 75 percent of the rain and snowmelt in the Delta watershed, which covers about 40 percent of California, should be allowed to flow uninterrupted to the bay and ocean.

Roughly speaking, the state's farms and cities now take so much water from upstream rivers and Delta pumps that only about half the water flows through to the bay. To meet the report's recommendation's, Delta water use would have to be cut in half.

But those are general figures, and the board, in adopting the report, deleted an appendix that attempted to better define the water cost of meeting the report's recommendations.

The deleted appendix estimated upstream water users, a category that includes water districts serving Oakland and San Francisco, might have to cut water use by two-thirds, while those that export water from Delta pumps might have to cut water use by up to one-fourth. The board said those figures were too hastily put together to be included in the report.