

Solano water officials bring 'laundry list' to Delta fix bargaining table

Barry Eberling, *Fairfield Daily Republic*, 8-17-10

Solano County water leaders have a list of requests they'd like to see become reality if large parts of the eastern county are transformed into sanctuaries for the rare Delta smelt.

The possible smelt habitat restoration is tied in with state efforts to fix the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, which provides water to 25 million Californians and is a home to rare plants and fish. One controversial idea is to move water through or around the Delta in a canal or tunnel. This would require doing environmental mitigation somewhere and Solano County is a prime candidate.

The Solano County Water Agency negotiating "a laundry list" of issues with the state Department of Water Resources and contractors for the state Water Project and federal Central Valley Project, General Manager David Okita said Monday.

"We've had a bunch of meetings," Okita said, but added that water exporters are not yet ready to resolve the economic issues that Solano County is broaching.

Rather, he said, they are waiting for the upcoming Bay Delta Conservation Plan. This study is to address both ways to move Delta water for human uses and ways to improve the environment. It is being put together by various water agencies, environmental groups and federal and state agencies.

A draft of the plan is scheduled to come out in November and draft environmental studies in the spring, said Matt Notley, a spokesman for the Bay Delta Conservation Plan.

The state must restore 8,000 acres of smelt habitat to meet a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biological opinion for Delta water exports and is looking to land in Solano and Yolo counties, including Prospect Island north of Rio Vista. Okita said the Bay Delta Conservation Plan could add up to 20,000 acres more in habitat restoration goals.

Among other things, the local water agency is talking about the county being compensated for money lost when farmland is converted to habitat, Okita said. That could include not only lost property tax money, but the financial activity associated with these farms that is lost to the general economy.

So far, the state and water contractors are "playing their cards close to the vest" on this issue, Okita said.

"They acknowledge it's an impact, but they haven't agreed to pay for it yet," he said.

The water agency also wants to make certain the county and its cities don't get hit with big bills to clean up water that runs down storm drains and into local waterways. The state could demand that urban and agricultural water that ends up in preserves for the Delta smelt be of the highest quality.

But getting the water contractors or someone else to agree to pay whatever costs might arise is proving difficult.

"That's going to be hard to do, because it's an open-ended commitment," Okita said. "And it may be hard to

segregate out what is a special treatment because of the new fish out there. So the baseline becomes harder to figure out. That's a real hard issue to negotiate.”

Local cities get Delta water from the North Bay Aqueduct, which pumps water from Barker Slough in eastern Solano County. The water agency wants to move these pumps to the Sacramento River, both because of the smelt issue and other issues.

This could cost \$400 million. Okita said the water agency is negotiating with the state and water contractors to pay half of this cost.