

Will Sacramento pin water bill on north?

Bob Williams, Record Searchlight, 6-7-10

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The water wars of California involve the amount of water available for different uses, quality of the water, and environmental issues such as declining salmon populations. Conflicting claims bedevil each issue. Are remediation plans for fish populations simply devices for moving more water to Southern California? Are salmon declines due primarily to dams? To water pumps? To water pollution? To striped bass, a voracious non-native eater of salmon smolts and Delta smelt? Or to insufficiently treated human waste discharged by Sacramento County?

In May, Patricia Gilbert, a professor of ecology and oceanography at the University of Maryland, made public a study that concluded that ammonia from Sacramento's wastewater discharged into the Sacramento River had disrupted plankton production in the Delta and stressed salmon populations more than had water diversions. An earlier study by Inge Werner of UC Davis found that Delta smelt may be harmed by this ammonia.

These studies attracted immediate news coverage when Professor Gilbert was forced to resign from a prestigious National Academy of Sciences panel appointed to review the science behind the Delta's fish population collapse. This led to the protest resignation of another well-known member of the panel and has raised quite a stink.

The Sacramento Regional County Sanitation District employs only secondary treatment of its wastewater before its discharge into the Sacramento River. Ammonia, a byproduct of urine and feces, is removed by tertiary wastewater treatment systems but not by secondary treatment. The sanitation district, which serves 1.4 million people, could significantly improve conditions for the Delta's fish population by upgrading its plant to tertiary treatment, an upgrade it has long resisted because of the cost, possibly \$1 billion.

The district now needs to discharge even more wastewater due to population growth in the region it serves. Not only will this additional discharge further harm fish, it could put the district in violation of the state's water quality standards. The Sacramento River's pollution does not exceed the allowable levels of harmful substances as it reaches Sacramento County. But further discharge at Freeport would put Sacramento County over allowed levels.

The district could discharge more secondary-treated wastewater by passing the buck and demanding changes from others. Increasing water flows from further north in the Sacramento River drainage would have a diluting effect, and the district could increase discharges into the river without further treatment. Additionally, if the pollutant concentrations in discharges were reduced further north — such as in Redding, Anderson and Chico — then the district could increase its discharges without tertiary treatment. It has long been suggested that district's managers have exerted themselves to achieve both of these goals over most of the past two decades. They have consistently denied this.

The burden of improving the Sacramento River's water quality began to move onto north state residents a few years back. The state Legislature amended the California Water Code in 1999 and in 2003 to regulate non-point

pollution sources from water runoff, primarily from agriculture. User fees were established to monitor pollutants and finance enforcement of these regulations. These fees would have been exorbitant for individual farms and ranches, so water coalitions were formed to sample water quality and meet the requirements. The Central Valley Region established conditional waivers for these coalition groups. But the law requires that conditional waivers be replaced by a long-term irrigated lands regulatory program next year.

The long-term regulatory program is being negotiated now. There is much at stake. If coalition groups cannot operate as they do now, and if individual farmers and ranchers must obtain discharge permits and pay for the monitoring involved, it will cost each an estimated \$60,000 per year. Most ranchers and smaller individual farm operators cannot afford this and will be denied the ability to irrigate regardless of established water rights.

Their unused water will go down the Sacramento River. This will have little benefit for the fish. It will benefit Sacramento County, which can hold off on building tertiary treatment facilities. It will benefit water users south of the Delta as more water can be exported by the proposed canal. In the “straw proposal” circulated by the Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board there are, however, provisions for conditional waivers and less stringent monitoring for sub-watersheds having few pollution problems.

The Central Valley Board is holding its cards close. Officials note that the “straw proposal” is not necessarily their preferred plan. They will not release their preferred plan until after the draft environmental impact report is completed. The board is required to release the draft EIR by July 31. Only then will we know whether our region is helped or harmed.