

Must it always be war in the Delta?

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Exporters of water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta are adept at diverting the supplies they need and want. They are also adept at diverting attention from their actions.

So there's reason to be skeptical about a study, funded by the Delta's largest water exporters, that concludes that ammonia discharges from Sacramento's regional wastewater treatment plant – not massive water diversions – are the primary cause of the Delta's ecological collapse.

The study, conducted by Patricia Glibert of the University of Maryland, generated a flurry of press releases Monday by water contractors in the San Joaquin Valley and Southern California. It also was reported in The Bee on Tuesday, under a big headline, "Delta woes tied to sewage."

Reading Glibert's findings, you'd never know Southern California has significantly increased diversions from the Delta over the last 20 years, and that those diversions coincided with a decline of Delta smelt and other species.

Instead, Glibert concludes that changes in nutrients are the primary factor in the estuary's ecological changes. In particular, she says, increased ammonia from Sacramento's wastewater has disrupted algae production and harmed the food source for many aquatic species.

No doubt, Sacramento is the largest generator of ammonia to the Delta. Until recently, those discharges were increasing yearly and could well be harming the Delta. Glibert's statistical analysis adds to a body of other research that has raised red flags about ammonia buildup in the estuary downriver from Sacramento.

Yet based on a review of data over three decades, is Glibert going too far in concluding that ammonia is the "primary" cause of the Delta's woes? Some scientists who have studied the estuary for decades think so. "It's really stretching it to say ammonium is the root cause of the Delta smelt decline," Bill Bennett, an ecologist at UC Davis, told the Contra Costa Times.

It's pretty easy to see how this blame game could play out. Water exporters will keep trying to build a scientific case against Sacramento, which will likely lead to litigation or expensive hearings before the State Water Resources Control Board. In turn, the Sacramento Regional County Sanitation District will continue to deny and deflect responsibility.

Instead of heading down this confrontational path, water exporters and Sacramento sanitation would be wise to focus their resources on speeding up a \$1 billion upgrade of a treatment plant that eventually will be needed. If it helps the Delta, all sides should be willing to help. That would be far more productive than continuing with the current pattern of finger-pointing and scientific cherry-picking.