

The changing Delta -- will fixing the system ruin the Sacramento Valley?

Heather Hacking, Chico Enterprise Record, 2-5-11

A bundle of water bills passed at the end of 2009 created a whole new world in water planning.

The intention is to approach state water issues in a more comprehensive way, to prepare the state for future generations.

A major component is that the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta is falling apart and can't be fixed unless the systems that run to and from the Delta are also dramatically improved. And that's driving development of the Delta Plan.

The main planning area for the Delta Plan is the Delta itself, as well as the Suisun Marsh. The secondary planning area includes watersheds that contribute flow to the Delta, and areas of California that use water from the Delta.

"The Legislature hasn't done anything this big since the State Water Project in 1960," Phil Isenberg, chairman of the Delta Stewardship Council, said during a recent meeting in a Chico meeting to gather comments on the Delta Plan environmental impact report.

Many of the aspects very controversial, Isenberg admitted.

"We are very concerned about a healthy Delta," said Paul Gosselin, director of the Butte County Department of Water and Resource Conservation, during the Jan. 26 meeting. "But we don't want solutions to affect what we have here."

One of the big concerns, Gosselin said, is protection of water and water use in the county of origin.

While the Delta Plan talks about protection of the Delta "as a place," the protection of the economy, environment and ecosystem in Northern California are equally important, Gosselin said.

James Townsend of Orland, a "small-time rancher" who irrigates his cattle pastures, said he is very concerned about groundwater levels.

Another woman said the state should retire "low-quality farm land on the western side of the San Joaquin."

Another speaker urged the use of desalination plants to meet future water needs.

Another woman called for "democracy," by having state leaders look out for "minority populations" that include areas where agriculture is sustainable.

Barbara Hennigan, of the Butte-Sutter Basin Area Groundwater Users, said people who have lived in the north valley for 50 years can remember when there "were once year-round streams that have become seasonal."

"They are now losing streams, seeping into spaces once filled with groundwater," Hennigan said.

Predictions of climate change indicate there will be less snowpack along the Feather River and "Lake Oroville will be little more than a surge pond."

The Sacramento River could become like the San Joaquin, she said.

Today, "every drop of water in this watershed ..." is used by people and "green growing things."

"When the Sacramento Valley crashes, the Delta and all of California crashes," Hennigan said, followed by applause from many in the crowd of about 65 people.

Others urged alternatives that did not increase demand of water from the Sacramento waterways and groundwater.

Barbara Vlamis, executive director of AquAlliance, referred to 13 pages of comments on the Delta Plan submitted by a coalition of 30 water and environmental groups.

To view, go to: www.ewccalifornia.org/home/index.php, then click on "scoping comments."

Northern California already faced a water crisis in 1994, when wells in the Durham area went dry during groundwater transfers, Vlamis said.

While work on the health of the Delta is important, Vlamis said many in the state need to recognize the health of the water system in the north.

Allie Hostler, of the Valley Hoopa Tribe on the Trinity River, said 90 percent the river is now sent south, despite promises diversions would not harm fish. With the Central Valley Project Improvement Act, promises were made in 1992 that restoration would take place, "but the Trinity has been undefended," she said.

Robin Huffman, advocacy director for the Butte Environmental Council, said discussion of conjunctive water management should be for local water use not "north/south conjunctive water management."

"There is no vast, underground network of water that can somehow magically be managed ... There's no new water."

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How the Delta got to this point

The Delta has been changing since the mid-1800s, when laws encouraged development of swamp land; that began the destruction of the state's wetlands, said Keith Coolidge, with the Delta Stewardship Council staff, during a meeting last month in Chico.

California mining brought silt down rivers, and river channels were straightened and dredged to prevent flooding.

Pumping plants were established at the bottom of "one of the world's greatest estuaries," Coolidge said during an overview at the start of the meeting.

Over time, urbanization has continued, more pollutants introduced to waterways and non-native species have increased.

"We can't deal with the Delta in isolation. That's why the planning area is so broad," Coolidge explained.