

State's big water deals look shaky

Thomas D. Elias, Marysville Appeal-Democrat, 11-25-11

Elias is a syndicated columnist specializing in California issues.

"In California, whiskey is for drinking, water is for fighting over." -- Often attributed to Mark Twain, circa 1870.

Regardless of whether America's greatest author and wit of the 19th century actually made that pithy comment, and some Mark Twain scholars question whether he did, the remark is at least as true today as it was when Twain allegedly said it.

Just look what's happening now between San Diego County and one of its two leading water suppliers, El Centro's Imperial Irrigation District. Then check out the confusion and possible deception surrounding the perpetually troubled Delta of the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers.

These are two of the state's prime water sources, and their futures are both in considerable doubt, with legal and political wrangling over them rampant.

The more surprising of these quarrels is over Imperial Valley water — actually not water rising in that parched yet fertile area along the Colorado River just north of the Mexican border, but water from Imperial's allocation that's now being taken out of the river considerably north of any valley farms, then shipped to the San Diego area. To make this possible, more than 5,000 agricultural acres in the Imperial Valley have already been fallowed, their owners receiving payments for water they no longer use.

That water now flows through the Colorado River aqueduct operated by the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California (MWD) and is relayed to the San Diego County Water Authority, a flow slated to increase over the next few decades under a 75-year agreement signed in 2003.

Even though the water now flows — while San Diego County money flows in the other direction, to the Imperial district -- so do the lawsuits. At issue are things like fish die-offs, possible dust storms and the salinity of the Salton Sea — a man-made lake southeast of Indio that's a major stopping point for migratory birds.

There's also the not-so-small matter of the state having committed in 2003 to fund work to save the Salton Sea, something it no longer can afford.

Meanwhile, nothing much has visibly changed in the Delta, from which flows much of the water used by cities in Southern and Central California, as well as farms in the Central Valley. Several cities in the East Bay and Peninsula suburbs of San Francisco also get supplies from the state Water Project, whose fluid originates in the Delta.

But there's still plenty of action. An environmental impact report paid for by water suppliers like the MWD and the Westlands Water District was labeled suspect even before its writing begins, with five Northern California Democratic members of Congress claiming the funding arrangement gives the big water agencies "unprecedented influence over the process."

The report will evaluate effects of a current plan to move water south via a tunnel under the Delta or a canal

(some call this a "big ditch") around it. That's a concept roundly voted down in a 1982 referendum overturning a law passed early that year which would have built a large, concrete-lined waterway around the Delta, called the Peripheral Canal.

The vote against that canal was based on Northern California fears of a big "water grab" where farms and cities south of the Delta would dam or otherwise tap the few remaining wild rivers to the north.

Any new Delta plan would have to shore up earthquake-damage-prone dikes that now protect thousands of homes in the Delta area from flooding. Altogether, there are now ten options for simultaneously making Delta water supplies more reliable, fixing dikes and restoring the area's ecosystem by protecting threatened fish populations and assuring high water quality in the face of continual threats of salt water intrusion from the San Francisco and San Pablo bays.

Accomplishing all that is a tall order that has stymied politicians and water experts for decades, especially with funding low and suspicions high in these bad economic times. No one now is quite sure where money for any work would come from, even if work is approved.

Put it all together and you get a picture of water insecurity in many of the most fertile and populous parts of California. No one knows what might happen if an earthquake cut off supplies from the Delta. Even less certain is what might happen if the Imperial-San Diego agreement were called off before such a quake might strike.

All of which makes the current wrangling over both Colorado River and Delta supplies more crucially important than most Californians know, as vital as any issue now confronting the state.