

California's water myths and facts

Doug Obegi, San Francisco Chronicle, 2-5-12

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Over the past decade, fishermen, farmers, politicians and conservation groups have struggled over trying to balance how much water can be diverted from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta estuary with how best to protect California's native fish. This year, California faces momentous decisions on plans to manage and restore the delta, and on whether to build a peripheral canal to divert water around the delta for cities and farms. Californians must make sure those decisions are based on facts.

Yet, pervasive myths about California water make it difficult for the public to make informed decisions. Here are three facts and three myths about the delta:

Can you tell truth from fiction?

1. Northern Californians don't get their water from the delta, so we shouldn't care what happens.
2. Even with stronger restrictions on pumping to protect salmon and other native fish, the state and federal water projects divert as much water from the delta as they did from 1980 to 2000.
3. As many jobs were lost from closing California's salmon fishery in 2009 as were lost in farming communities from restricting pumping to protect fish.
4. Despite increasing flows to protect fish over the past two decades, delta fish populations continue to decline.
5. Most of the water pumped from the delta goes to Southern California lawns and swimming pools.
6. California can divert less water from the delta and still meet its water needs by investing in water efficiency, water recycling and improved groundwater and storm water management.

Answers:

1. False. While San Francisco does not receive water from the delta, the city's water does come from the Tuolumne River, part of the delta watershed. In addition, parts of Contra Costa, Alameda, Santa Clara and San Mateo counties depend on delta water. Northern California's \$250 million per year salmon fishery (including the fishing boats tied up at San Francisco's Fisherman's Wharf and the tourists that visit them), depend on the health of the delta.
2. True. As much water is diverted from the delta on average today as before the historically high pumping levels of the 2000s devastated the delta ecosystem, according to the state Department of Water Resources and the Public Policy Institute of California.
3. True. Despite wildly inflated myths, studies by economists from the state, UC Davis and University of the Pacific show that California's fishing industry lost about as many jobs as did the farming industry when pumping was restricted during the 2009 drought to protect fish.

4. False. Since pumping has been reduced, populations of delta smelt have rebounded dramatically, and salmon populations have also increased.

5. False. Nearly half of the water exported from the delta is for agribusiness. Thanks to improved efficiency, Los Angeles uses as much water today as it did 25 years ago, despite adding 1 million residents, and Orange County has one of the largest water recycling plants in the nation. Even so, improved water-use efficiency could create trillions of gallons of new water each year for cities and agriculture.

6. True. Modeling by the state Department of Water Resources shows that the new water sources available by investing in water efficiency and recycling is more water than California has ever exported from the delta. Urban water managers know this; the City of Los Angeles plans to meet its water needs by investing in these tools, while simultaneously cutting its use of delta water in half.