

State must block Delta water grab

Woodland Daily Democrat, 2-19-12

Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Visalia, wants to solve the budding Delta water calamity in the worst way. Literally.

Nunes wants to give priority for San Joaquin River water to Central Valley farmers, which could mean drying up the San Joaquin River for a 40-mile stretch and destroying the fragile Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta ecosystem, the largest estuary west of the Mississippi.

"This legislation is nothing more than an attempt by well-funded south-of-Delta water contractors to steal water from the North with no regard for the fishers, farmers, families and businesses who depend on the Delta for their livelihoods" said Congressman Mike Thompson. "This bill puts politics ahead of a half-century of established science, guts environmental protections and kills local jobs. It should be rejected, and solutions to California's water challenges should be based on sound science so that our Delta communities, wildlife and environment are not harmed."

On Thursday, Nunes pushed his legislation through the House Natural Resources Committee. Majority Whip Kevin McCarthy, R-Bakersfield, is a co-sponsor, so it will be difficult to defeat when it goes to a vote of the full House in the next two weeks. That means California Sens. Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein will have to kill it in the Senate.

Both oppose it -- especially after Nunes remarked to reporters, "Now they've got to fight for their environmental wacko friends."

Actual environmental wackos will be surprised to be in Feinstein's company.

The worst thing about Nunes' legislation is that it deepens the divide between players in the Delta water debate. Feinstein has been seeking a compromise and, if anything, could be accused of cozying up to Big Ag. But if agricultural interests are going to line up behind Nunes' winner-take-all approach, finding a solution that works for all Californians will be much harder.

Nunes' bill would do away with the 2006 court-approved settlement, a decade in the making, between Delta water users and ecologists to balance the health of the ecosystem with the needs of agriculture and a growing population. The bill would allow the federal government to take water away from Northern California farms and cities and give it to Central Valley farmers. It would stop the restoration of the San Joaquin River and effectively obliterate environmental laws governing the Delta.

A better solution lies within the framework of the Bay Delta Conservation Plan, which is being pushed by John Laird, California's highly respected Natural Resources secretary. The plan has its flaws, including the possibility of a conveyance canal around the Delta, but its backers are committed to letting science drive the solution to long-term water needs. They know a strong earthquake could hit the Delta any day, destroying its fragile levees and, with them, much of the region's water supply.

All over America, people wondered how New Orleans' politicians could have failed to recognize the dangers of their weakened levee system before Hurricane Katrina. If Nunez manages to destroy the Bay Delta plan, Yolo County and the Sacramento region will find out.