

California needs a more balanced approach to water

San Jose Mercury News, 2-7-14

The Central Valley's thirst for water to irrigate its fields has already decimated its own aquifer. It's made a 60-mile stretch of the once-majestic San Joaquin River run dry, devastating an area where wildlife once flourished.

It appears California's Republicans in the House of Representatives won't be satisfied until they've drained the entire Delta, and perhaps the Sacramento River as well.

Last week they pushed through a bill that would give the Central Valley virtually unlimited access to water from the Delta at the expense of Silicon Valley and other parts of the Bay Area that rely on it. It would eliminate federal environmental protections, sweep away long-standing water agreements and end the San Joaquin River restoration project that practically every water agency has supported.

Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer are appalled. We're confident they'll stop the bill in the Senate. But it's important to understand the dynamics of this latest water grab because it won't be the last.

California needs to establish a reasonable balance in water distribution between ag and urban users, including conservation, planning for growth and contingencies for drought. Destroying the Delta to preserve one slice of California's economy at the expense of all others would be insane.

Bay Area cities are doing reasonably well on conservation, as the Mercury News' Paul Rogers reports Sunday -- especially compared to places like Sacramento. Of course everyone can do better, but agriculture has been unwilling to make real sacrifices -- or take responsibility for making the situation worse.

Consider almonds.

In the past 20 years, the Central Valley has doubled its acreage in almond orchards to nearly 800,000, producing 2 billion pounds a year and exporting 70 percent of the crop, which yields nearly \$4 billion in revenue.

But almond trees, unlike vegetable crops, can't be taken out of production in dry years. The trees would die. Each acre of almonds needs about 1.3 million gallons of water a year, twice as much as fruits and vegetables, but farmers have planted them without securing sufficient water rights.

This is what the massive, \$25 billion, twin tunnel Bay Delta Conservation Plan is really about. Big Ag is paying the upfront costs for the project. Backers claim it's needed just for reliability, not to pump more water, but there are cheaper and better ways to do that. Farmers expect to get more water flowing through those tunnels. If not, why pay for them?

In a way the House's latest attempt to hijack California's water for one industry has done a service by making farmers' motives -- and the Central Valley's disregard for urban water needs -- so transparent. We'd tell them to go jump in a lake, but they've probably pumped them all dry.