

What are Met's intentions as new Delta dweller?

Michael Fitzgerald, Stockton Record, 11-12-15

The Metropolitan Water District of Southern California is negotiating to buy four Delta islands. In the minds of locals, this is like the fox pricing the henhouse.

The Met, as it is called, is the most powerful of all water interests perennially contriving to draw water from the ailing estuary. The mighty Met supplies 19 million in metro Los Angeles.

Delta lovers fear the whole “Chinatown” thing, the Met’s shameful (but long past) history of ruthless and underhanded water acquisition that dried Owens Valley and destroyed its economy.

But the head of the Met is saying his agency is more concerned with keeping the Delta healthy than acquiring more water.

“We’re more interested, frankly, by the environmental pieces of it than we are the water supply pieces,” Met General Manager Jeffrey Kightlinger said.

Could that be true?

A dying Delta is bad for business because courts order water export cutbacks to save the fisheries. A healthy Delta conduces to more reliable water, Kightlinger said.

The four islands — Bouldin Island, Webb Tract, Bacon Island, Holland Tract (plus a chip off Chipps Island) — are part of a water storage project called Delta Wetlands.

Its owners are the subsidiary of a Swiss Insurance firm. In that respect, Delta Wetlands is the Achilles' heel of Delta property, the most vulnerable to acquisition by outside interests with different goals than the maintaining of the Delta’s health and traditions.

The plan has long been to fill two islands with water for export in wet years and transform two in to habitat.

Buyers of the island also get the water rights that come with them. These water rights are “riparian” — owners of property abutting a river have rights to some of its water.

But only to use on their property. Riparian water cannot be sold or exported, to Los Angeles or anyplace else. So that water cannot be the Met’s motive.

The Swiss owners, however, have applied to the state for “appropriative” rights, water that could be shipped south. The Met would inherit this application.

But Kightlinger says this water would not amount to much.

On the other hand, owning two of the islands in the path of the peripheral tunnels definitely would be in The Met’s interest.

Time and again state scientists who have come to the gates of Delta farms and requested permission to conduct soil or archaeological tests for the tunnels have been told to go pound sand.

That issue is in the courts. If The Met owned those islands, they could welcome state officials and move that

part of the process along.

No drawn-out eminent domain procedures would be necessary, either.

If Kightlinger is to be taken at his word, however, the environmental benefits of the project are the main value.

Determining whether that is truth or greenwash boils down to whether turning two islands into habitat really would improve the Delta's health.

After all, the two islands total roughly 1.5 percent of the Delta's vast, 1,000-square-mile area.

I asked Peter Moyle, UC Davis biology distinguished professor emeritus and associate director of the Center for Watershed Sciences.

"It's a sort of a big unknown," Moyle said. "No one's really tried to do restoration of the size they're talking about."

The Swiss envisioned habitat for ducks and other critters, not open water fish, Moyle said. Turning the islands into habitat for such species as Delta smelt, longfin smelt, striped bass and threadfin shad would require not merely adding water but Delta tides.

"That would seem very difficult to do," Moyle said. "It might be possible ... but it's never been done before."

So the environmental medicine The Met may administer to the Delta, while theoretically possible, is unprecedented and untested. Still, the patient is dying, and it's in the Met's interest to save it.