

What's behind a bid to shift dollars from the bullet train to water projects

George Skelton, Los Angeles Times, 11-19-15

Grab billions from Gov. Jerry Brown's bullet train project and spend it on generating more water. Build some dams. Many Californians have been shouting for that.

Now two Republican state politicians are backing a proposed ballot initiative to make that a reality. Scuttle the train and store more water.

But there's significantly more to it.

While high-speed rail certainly will draw the headline focus, the proposal's primary purpose apparently is to reduce water for the environment and provide more for agriculture.

It would amend the state constitution to make domestic use and crop irrigation the top priorities for California water. And those would be the only listed priorities.

The water priorities provision is wonky and less rousing than train-terminating. But it would be historic.

"It's a very sneaky attack on the environment," says Doug Obegi, senior attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council.

"It overturns long-standing law, some of it dating to when the state was first created. It potentially undercuts environmental statutes. It seems intended to reduce protections for rivers and fisheries."

The sponsors don't necessarily disagree.

"We've made a lot of decisions to protect species that are struggling to stay alive," says Sen. Bob Huff (R-San Dimas), who will be termed out next year and is running for Los Angeles County supervisor. Huff and George Runner, a member of the state Board of Equalization, are co-sponsoring the ballot initiative.

"The average person believes he should be high on the food chain" for water, Huff says. "The reality is he's not. Of all the species that ever existed, 95% are now extinct. We didn't do that. How much do we spend on nature when it has a way of adapting to the times and evolving?"

In many cases, however, we did do that — or at least chased the species out of our habitat. Salmon and steelhead runs have declined dramatically.

In the 20th century, we dried up 95% of California's native wetlands. It's almost laughable when business and agriculture, with straight faces, call now for "balancing" what's left, the final 5%.

"The drought has caused an environmental crisis for native fish and water birds, which was aggravated in some places by the relaxation of environmental standards to allow for an increase in water for cities and farms," the non-ideological Public Policy Institute of California reported Tuesday.

The institute recommended that the state water board designate "an environmental water budget" for each river and allow local officials to implement it. But that wouldn't be possible under the proposed ballot measure.

"If you're down to your last 50 gallons," Huff asks, "would you give it to a person who's thirsty or a fish so it could migrate upstream? People should be No. 1, agriculture No. 2 because it's feeding people."

But many of our water-gulping farms — especially the nut orchards — are feeding people in Asia. Californians also like to eat fish. And on the coast, that puts food on the table for commercial fishermen.

A reminder: Agriculture uses 80% of California's developed water. Only 20% goes to urban use.

Agriculture thinks that has a bad ring. So it spins different figures: 50% of all California water goes to the environment, 40% to farms and 10% to cities. Same difference: Agriculture uses four times as much water as urban areas.

And "environmental use" includes every drop in the rivers. In normal years, that water isn't "wasted" to the sea. It repels salt and keeps our water supply fresh. It also flushes poisons out of bays, sustains the coastal fishing industry and allows Californians to enjoy some recreation.

But farmers, especially in the San Joaquin Valley, complain of being "dust bowled" by environment protectors. Never mind that Gov. Pat Brown 55 years ago sold Californians on his landmark state water project by promising that only "surplus" northern water would be shipped to the arid south. There isn't much surplus these days.

But back to the choo-choo.

"What Californians voted for on high-speed rail isn't being delivered," Runner says correctly. "It's so different, they should have a shot at stopping it."

Basically, the bullet train's projected cost has doubled since its approval in 2008 and the rail line was significantly shortened.

The price tag is now at least \$68 billion. Voters authorized \$9 billion in state bonds. They were told the line would stretch from San Diego to San Francisco and Sacramento. Now it's just Los Angeles to San Francisco.

The initiative would take what's left of the train bonds — \$8 billion — and spend it on water facilities. Also, \$2.7 billion in storage money approved last year as part of a \$7.5-billion water bond would be added. The total \$10.7 billion would be used for two new dams, expansion of current dams, recharging aquifers, capturing storm water and updating other facilities.

An agriculture-rooted organization, the California Water Alliance, originated the initiative. The measure was unveiled last week. It's targeted for the November 2016 ballot.

Sponsors will need to raise a minimum \$2 million for signature collecting, then at least \$8 million more for the campaign.

"Everyone likes to pop off" about the bullet train and water shortage, Runner says. "We'll see whether people actually step up."

If they do, it could trigger a wild free-for-all.