

Water is jobs

U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein, San Francisco Chronicle, 2-18-10

This is a make-or-break moment for California's agricultural economy.

After three years of drought, winter storms have boosted storage capacity at key reservoirs and replenished the Sierra Nevada snowpack to between 90 and 129 percent of average.

Yet hundreds of family-owned farms in the Central Valley still don't know if they'll be able to plant, hire and harvest this year because they may not get sufficient water allocations. Thousands of farm industry workers could again be standing in food lines in towns with unemployment rates as high as 40 percent.

I visited the San Joaquin Valley in August and was shocked to see what happens when farmers get only 10 percent of the water they need. The air was filled with dust from the more than 400,000 acres of recently fallowed farmland. It was clear that a significant part of our \$36 billion agricultural sector could vanish.

Water is jobs in California. More than 2,700 growers rely on water from the Central Valley Project to stay in business.

As an environmentalist, I understand the need to preserve our natural resources. In the Senate, I have directly engaged every major environmental issue facing our state. I brokered the deal to save the Headwaters Forest, facilitated the Bay Delta Accord, authored bills to protect the Mojave Desert and Lake Tahoe, and led efforts to transform 17,000 acres of salt ponds into wetlands in the San Francisco Bay.

Last September, I helped stop an amendment on the Senate floor that would have waived the Endangered Species Act in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

However, there currently exists an imbalance in the measures the government will take to protect the delta smelt and those it will take to protect people from economic devastation. I seek to remedy this imbalance by making technical modifications to the biological opinions that restrict delta pumping and give west side farmers the minimum amount of water necessary to work this year - 38-40 percent of their contractual allocation - while respecting environmental protections.

Currently, the amount of delta water available for agriculture or drinking water will be reduced from 15 percent to just 8 percent of the delta's water flow during key irrigation months. My amendment would modestly increase the water exported from the delta for human uses during April and May, while leaving in place flows to provide water for salmon runs.

This is a fair compromise that will help stem devastation while honoring environmental protections. As things stand now, farmers will not be able to farm, and fishermen who rely on the Delta for salmon runs will not be able to fish, despite increased water supply. My amendment would also authorize emergency aid for salmon fishermen in the event of another closed fishing season.

The Endangered Species Act is a vital yet inflexible instrument, and we must consider the human condition. I can't sit by as farms, jobs and entire communities in the valley disappear. There is precedent for my proposal. In 2003, the U.S. Senate voted unanimously for a bill that made one change to the implementation of each applicable biological opinion while upholding essential protections for New Mexico's silvery minnow.

I hope there will be an administrative solution that makes further legislation unnecessary. But I won't leave San Joaquin Valley families to fend for themselves in dire circumstances. With 2.3 million Californians unemployed, I believe jobs must be our top priority.

Ultimately, we need a long-term solution, or the pain the San Joaquin Valley feels today will spread throughout the state. Without major efforts to restore the delta, increase water storage, improve water recycling and build a new conveyance, today's crisis is only the beginning.