

Feinstein offers an equitable water plan

While only a temporary fix, it would let farmers get crops in this year.

Fresno Bee, 2-18-10

We have supported a balanced approach to dividing up California's limited water supply that recognizes the needs of protecting the environment, providing drinking water to urban residents and giving farmers a fair share of this crucial resource. But water allocations for agriculture on the San Joaquin Valley's west side are far from equitable. Federal law and court decisions have led to thousands of acres of fallowed farmland, caused economic devastation to some of Fresno County's poorest communities, and damaged the Valley's agricultural-based economy.

Sen. Dianne Feinstein is now offering an amendment to the federal jobs bill that would temporarily modify pumping restrictions and give farmers up to 40% of their normal allocation. West-side farmers received only 10% of their federal allotments last year. Feinstein's proposal is a reasonable solution to the water allocation disparity. It would not do away with the Endangered Species Act, which has caused some of the pumping restrictions, but would provide temporary relief to the communities suffering from farm-related job losses.

The environmental community adamantly opposes the Feinstein plan and says it would kill endangered species that the federal law is designed to protect. Those species include salmon, steelhead and Delta smelt. But we question why agricultural pumping is being targeted for criticism, yet there's no similar outcry against cities — such as Sacramento — for dumping treated sewage into the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

There are other threats to endangered fish, including the many invasive species that have entered the Delta. The smelt population declined, for example, even after two years of the pumping restrictions.

Feinstein's amendment would offer some fairness to the issue, even if it's of a temporary nature. Someone needs to stand up for the residents of the west-side communities. Critics continually frame the issue as giving water to "wealthy corporate farmers." Those same critics never mention the farmworker families who have been deprived of their livelihoods. They don't talk about the huge food lines set up in Mendota to help feed the victims of the pumping restrictions.

It is time to stop playing politics with the issue and get behind this reasonable plan. Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Visalia, has been pushing for this type of action, and we urge him to join Feinstein, Democratic Reps. Jim Costa and Dennis Cardoza and west-side farmers in supporting it. This amendment is the quickest way to get water to farms.

We need a long-term solution to the state's water problems, but that will take years to develop. The west side needs water now, and the Feinstein plan gives farmers a chance to grow crops this year.