

Flows to restore San Joaquin River start today

Kelly Zito, San Francisco Chronicle, 10-1-09

More than a half century after a colossal federal dam built outside Fresno transformed 64 miles of the San Joaquin River into a dusty trench and annihilated native salmon populations, engineers will open the floodgates to begin a new era for California's second-longest river.

Beginning today, operators will release small pulses of water from Friant Dam with an eye toward "rewetting" the parched riverbed and ultimately reintroducing salmon species beginning next year. Sizable, year-round flows will not push water through the entire length of the 150-mile stretch of the river between the dam and its union with the Merced River until 2014.

Changes in the dam's operations are the first visible signs of a historic river restoration settlement between environmentalist and fishing groups, the federal government and agricultural interests.

But the initial flows also highlight the contradictory pressures facing dams in modern California.

While this week brought a tentative agreement to remove four dams along the Klamath River in far northern California and southern Oregon to revive key salmon runs, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has made it clear that a pending overhaul of the state's deteriorating water system will gain his signature only if it includes major new dam and reservoir projects.

Many involved in the protracted fight to restore the San Joaquin River say today's action represents a rare instance of sacrifice, cooperation and success.

"This is truly momentous," said Monty Schmitt, senior scientist at the Natural Resources Defense Council. "When you look at the backdrop of water resource conflicts happening throughout the West, there are very few examples of problems being solved. No one got exactly what they wanted in this, but we've settled this and we're getting water in the river. That's huge."

The legal battle to revive the San Joaquin River, which carves a crescent-shaped, south-north route from the foothills east of Fresno to the sprawling Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta east of the Bay Area, dates back to 1988.

That year, the Natural Resources Defense Council and environmental groups sued the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and other federal agencies to prevent them from renewing long-term water contracts with Friant-area irrigation districts that would have continued to siphon virtually all of the water from San Joaquin.

When Friant Dam was built in the 1940s to provide water to about 1 million acres of farmland, it slashed flows to a seasonal trickle and some experts came to describe the river as little more than an agricultural drainage ditch. Once-plentiful salmon runs - old timers told of scooping fish from the rivers to use as hog feed - disappeared by the early 1950s.

Nearly two decades after the legal wrangling began, in 2006, a federal judge sided with the environmental and fishing groups, ordering the reinstatement of flows and salmon.

This past March, Congress gave the project a financial boost by approving \$400 million for the river as part of a landmark wilderness bill. An additional \$200 million will come from previously approved California bonds. Funds will pay for studying water flows and temperatures, fixing damaged canals, deepening of too-shallow channels and adding fish ladders.

As it stands, the San Joaquin flows for 38 miles past Friant Dam, where it is gradually funneled into cropland by those with rights to pull water directly from the river. At that point, however, the riverbed turns into a sandy furrow for 24 miles. It flows again near the Mendota Pool, where it meets up with the federally constructed canal that moves water from the delta to the Central Valley. Past Sack Dam a short way downriver, the San Joaquin again runs dry for about 40 miles until it converges with the Merced River and its tributaries.

Wildlife biologists who lament the loss of a robust river system teeming with fish and waterfowl welcome the effort to re-establish one, continuous river flow to the Pacific Ocean.

For the 15,000 farmers served by the river and Millerton Lake behind Friant Dam, however, the 18 percent or so reduction in their water supplies couldn't come at a worse time. Drought, environmental restrictions on water exports from the delta and a floundering economy have forced many Central Valley farmers to fallow acreage or pump water from underground. Pumping too much water from wells carries significant risks: It can push water levels below the reach of wells and cause land subsidence.

"This isn't going to be catastrophic, but farmers are going to pump, pump, pump groundwater," said Randy McFarland, spokesman for the Friant Water Users Authority, which represents the region's farmers. "In a sense, that's going to defeat the purpose of the project because the dam was built originally because farmers were depleting groundwater in the 1920s."