

Bill Diedrich: Drought of our own making

<http://www.fresnobee.com/2014/03/04/3803643/bill-diedrich-drought-of-our-own.html>

By Bill Diedrich

Fresno

March 4, 2014

First off, let me say thank you to fellow farmer Joe Del Bosque and his family, who met with President Barack Obama during his visit to the San Joaquin Valley. What Joe, and others like him do, is at great sacrifice to their personal lives and families.

Thank you, too, to all our water district (public agencies like San Luis Water District) staff and families who have made the survival of our operations a part of their daily lives. I am grateful for all you do.

The water delivery system in California was designed for one purpose: "To deliver water to arid lands of the West." The dreamers, planners and designers could never have imagined how successful it would be! We literally feed the world. The nation reaps tremendous economic benefits and safe, healthy food from the activity generated by this water system. This is good.

However, those folks were so intent on harnessing flood and irrigation water for the well-being of farms, families and factories that they neglected to adequately consider the potential detriment to certain anadromous fish species.

We have created a jobs and food-producing machine the likes of which there has never been in the history of the world!

We have created a state that everyone wants to live in.

We have decided as a society, that we want to, and now are legally required to, restore the environmental impact of a system built 70 years to 80 years ago (ESA, NEPA, CEQA, EPA, AB 32, CVPIA, lawsuits, etc). None of us can agree on how that is to be accomplished, and as a result of that, we jeopardize it all.

We do all agree on that. If you are not familiar with the acronyms above, you should be. They are changing your life.

California needs efficient, environmentally friendly conveyance of water from the north to the south, and more storage of water for the long term. We need additional storage adequate to maintain growth, agricultural production and the recovery of environmental systems. Let's just say we need continual development of water.

We have taken a break from the development of water as a state for many years, and for this we are going to pay a dear price. We must reconcile our differences and bickering in order to re-start water infrastructure development now!

For the interim, we need legislative relief from the more onerous pumping restrictions in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. From Feb. 8 through Feb. 19, there were at times 40,000-50,000 acre-feet per day flowing through the Sacramento River and out through the Golden Gate.

The pumps were on, but only at half capacity and only 10,000 acre-feet per day were captured to help relieve California's serious state of emergency.

This is the pulse that all of us were waiting for from the heavy north state precipitation earlier in February. The inconvenient truth is that in 10 days, we could have captured an additional 100,000 acre-feet with existing facilities — if the will existed.

The reason we did not is a biological opinion prevented increased pumping to protect fish. But monitoring showed little or no danger to fish if the pumps had been allowed to capture more of the water that flowed by.

Federal fish agencies must be more flexible and ensure restrictions are relevant and effective in protecting fish. They must be required to demonstrate beneficial use of environmental flows, just as I must, in the use of water and the irrigation of my crops.

The drought emergency makes this especially necessary as many good people will lose their jobs, their homes and their professions as work in California dries up. Did anyone present this to President Obama? The opportunity certainly presented itself. What a blessing the north state rain was to drive home the point to our distinguished guests. We are indeed in a hydrological drought, but underlying the hydrological drought is perpetual regulatory drought.

What are we going to do with the next hydrological blessing that comes? God willing, it will come. He did send us a little relief, and we looked the other way.

I will not give up. I will continue to shine a light on this issue, looking for paths forward.

How about you?

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