

Michael Fitzgerald: Say no to Temperance Flat

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<http://www.fresnobee.com/2014/04/28/3900030/michael-fitzgerald-say-no-to-temperance.html>

Fresno

April 28, 2014

I sometimes wonder how Stocktonians of the 1930s and '40s reacted to the 1941 construction of Friant Dam, the dam outside Fresno that ruined the San Joaquin River.

Did they loudly object? Or go like lambs to the slaughter?

For my part, I have resolved that any proposed dam affecting Stockton or the San Joaquin Delta will get an airing in this space. So here we go.

The Temperance Flat Dam, proposed for the San Joaquin River upstream of Friant Dam, would put a 665-foot-high cork in a Sierra river gorge.

It would cost \$2.6 billion, hold 1.3 million acre feet of water and — the number that counts — yield 76,000 acre-feet of water a year for Central Valley farms and cities.

That's enough water to supply the city of Stockton (not counting CalWater customers) for over a year; on the other hand, that amounts to only 1% of water delivered by Uncle Sam's Central Valley Project.

Before we go any further, my goal is to avoid any knee-jerk formulations, you know, dam bad/fish good. California does need solutions.

On the other hand, Friant Dam killed the salmon run, threw the whole Delta out of whack and hurt the quality of life in Stockton.

Never again!

The thinking with Temperance Flat is, broadly, that California's water storage isn't big enough to see the state through long droughts.

That much is true.

Furthermore, the thinking goes, Friant's 520,000-acre-foot reservoir, Millerton Lake, is too small to catch the deluge of water, 1.2 million acre feet, that the river carries through it.

"We need additional water," said Louis Moore, a spokesman for the Bureau of Reclamation. "This is one perspective for adding additional water to the system to support the growth of our population, the demands put on water for use in agriculture and for endangered species."

Every dollar invested in Temperance Flat Dam would return \$1.35, the Bureau of Reclamation estimates. For that reason, the bureau says, the dam makes sense.

Oddly, by the bureau's own reckoning, the modest amount of water Temperance Flat will provide to cities and farms does not justify its cost.

What does then? Primarily the additional economic plus of "ecosystem benefits."

Yes, here certainly is a rare case of a dam justified economically by its purported benefits to a river.

Salmon need cold water, the Bureau argues. Temperance Flat could be constructed with tubes and gates that could release cold water from deep down in the reservoir where cooler water is insulated by the layers of water above it. Friant Dam can't do that. The Bureau put a multimillion-dollar benefit tag on that.

Skeptical, Friends of the River commissioned economist Jeffrey Michael of University of the Pacific to analyze the bureau's economic benefits claims. Michael tore them apart: "Ecosystem benefits are the largest category of economic benefits, and the project does not have benefits that exceed costs without large ecosystem benefits."

But, Michael said, the bureau wildly inflated the value of the dam's ecosystem benefits. "Reasonable adjustments to this one category of benefits would result in a benefit-cost ratio of less than one," he writes.

Meaning every dollar invested would get less than \$1 back. How much less? About 55 cents less, for a return of 45 cents for every dollar invested. A money loser.

Besides, if helping salmon is the point, Michael writes, there are vastly cheaper ways than a \$2.6 billion dam. Like installing temperature control devices in Friant Dam, habitat restoration or increased water releases.

Another point: "If this was a dam that water contractors were expected to pay all the costs for, they wouldn't build it," said Steve Evans, a consultant to Friends of the River. "It wouldn't create enough water."

What gives then?

Most dam bills before Congress leave open the question of who pays for it. In my opinion, the Bureau of Reclamation is ginning up the dam's supposed broad public benefits so the public will pay for it, not the politically powerful water hogs — excuse me, the beneficiaries. Don't buy it.

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