

Mike Dunbar: Tweaking tunnel plan won't make a difference

By Mike
Dunbar

It's interesting that a plan that has been in the works for at least eight years requires so much tinkering.

The Bay Delta Conservation Plan — the state's plan to save the West Coast's largest natural estuary by removing up to 75% of the water that flows into it — will not include pumps on the Sacramento River. Hold your applause.

The announcement was made Dec. 18; those making it expected appreciation. After all, those pumps would be ugly, and once you remove the ugly then this water plan should be just fine. Right?

Removing three pumps from north of Sacramento makes no difference. It's not the pumps, it's the water. Diverting most of the Sacramento's flow will devastate the delta and economically crush those who depend on it. By extension, it will have substantial negative impacts in Stanislaus and Merced counties.

"Suggesting that this addresses local concerns, well it most certainly does not," said Assembly Member Kristin Olsen, who lives in Riverbank but represents a district that reaches from Stockton to Modesto. "It will have the same devastating impact on farmers, families and businesses in the delta region."

The Sacramento River supplies 75% to 80% of the delta's fresh water, pushing back San Francisco Bay's salt water from farms in Ripon, Manteca, Lodi and on up to Davis. The BDCP claims to have two co-equal goals: "saving" the delta and making deliveries of Sacramento River water to people far away more reliable.

To meet the second goal, the state intends to build those two giant tunnels (each 40-foot wide), carrying most of the Sacramento beneath the Delta to the pumps near Tracy.

But there's a problem. If those tunnels divert most of the Sacramento River under the delta, how will the state meet the first goal of saving the delta? That's where we come in. The only other river that flows into the delta is the San Joaquin, and it's not much of a river until the Merced, Tuolumne and Stanislaus rivers flow into it.

For the past 100 years, give or take a decade, the water flowing down those rivers has been put to beneficial use by farmers from Modesto to Merced to Manteca and back again. They created a "paradise" in what had been dry grasslands. It's not that we don't want to share the water, but we fear the state intends to take far, far too much.

How will the state take it? By demanding higher unimpaired flows for environmental purposes. The State Water Resources Control Board — dominated by appointees from the environmental community — is already saying it needs at least 35% of unimpaired flows to save our rivers. They insist this has nothing to do with the desire of powerful interests to take most of the Sacramento and suck it south.

"From what I can tell, it appears to be just smoke and mirrors," said Olsen. "They're still taking massive amounts of water and diverting it away from the delta."

That's why virtually every legislator from the delta region opposes it. You might have seen the "Stop the Tunnels" signs in Manteca, Galt and Stockton. There are even a few sprinkled through Escalon and Riverbank.

While it's true that opposition seems to be building against the incredibly flawed BDCP, there has yet to be a similar push-back against the state's water grab from the Tuolumne, Merced and Stanislaus. Currently, only about 14% to 16% of the Tuolumne River is allowed to flow unimpaired to the San Joaquin. Many people recognize that more water needs to be allotted to improve the river's health. But the state wants 35% and some have called for 60%. Those are

fighting words.

That groundwater issue is significant. The state's landmark law, passed in August, gives counties five years to develop a sustainability plan. That is an excellent and laudable goal.

But San Joaquin Valley counties use surface water to replenish the groundwater through irrigation, and aren't getting credit for that use.

Olsen, Assembly Member Adam Gray of Merced and the entire Valley delegation want to see that changed.

"We're considering introducing a package of bills with each one taking on a small piece of this issue," said Olsen. Each bill would be co-authored by every other member of the Valley delegation — Republicans and Democrats. Great idea.

An even better idea is to stop tinkering with Bay Delta Conservation Plan and scrap the entire thing.

Mike Dunbar is the opinion page editor of The Modesto Bee. Email: mdunbar@modbee.com.

[Copyright](#)

© 2014 www.fresnobee.com and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved. <http://www.fresnobee.com>