

Doug Vagim: Fresno water plan is a boondoggle

By Doug Vagim

The City of Fresno says if it builds the proposed southeast water-treatment plant, the water will come. Not true! This will be just another city boondoggle like the Grizzlies Stadium and the rest.

That's because the city does not have its own water storage.

Fresno's allotted Millerton Lake water is not guaranteed. Last year, the city received no water from Millerton, and the year before, it received only around one-third of its contract amount.

The city does not have a sufficient and steady flow of lake water for Mayor Ashley Swearingin's plan to operate efficiently and be cost effective. The city claims there's enough lake water to run a new southeast plant and the existing northeast water-treatment plant to provide 180,000 acre feet of groundwater recharge each year.

Historically, however, lake water delivered to Fresno is on a day-to-day basis, and nearly all of this allotted lake water is delivered in a four-month period during the snowmelt runoff. That's too much water for these plants to process.

Unlike Los Angeles and San Francisco, our city lacks its own surface-water storage. In Fresno, the city will depend on the limited storage in Pine Flat Lake that Fresno Irrigation District (FID) has to service its 600-square-mile area.

The data shows that in most years, the additional treatment plant's operation would be limited to running at less than 50% capacity or be turned off for over half of the year. That will not improve by adding the proposed Enterprise Accountability and Oversight Act — or anything else but more water storage.

The city depends on two lakes (Millerton and Pine Flat) to supply its surface water, and neither is under Fresno's control. The agencies that do control the lakes deliver the city's water portion on their own delivery schedule, and we must take the water when delivered or share it with FID. None of the water released by the city "goes down the river to the ocean" — a too-often repeated sound bite from the mayor and others.

The plants do not create water, and they do not store water; they process and treat ditch water for human consumption. Every drop of the city's water entitlement has been put to a beneficial use for its own use or by allowing the local, small farm growers of FID to use for crop production and groundwater recharge.

This had been the process for the city and local growers for nearly 80 years, and very little will change by building an oversized water-treatment plant without more surface water storage.

The historic structure of our surface water source for this region is more like a water collective than a bully-take-all method, like Los Angeles is to the Owens Valley. The city of Fresno seems to be heading in that direction.

Moreover, the rates to pay for the mayor's plan will impact too many households.

The public utilities director admits that the water rates are set so when households are forced to scrimp on water to afford their water bills, revenue will drop, but enough cash will roll in to pay the project's debt.

Two-thirds of that debt would flow from the new southeast plant. So, once again, it's the tale of those who can afford to pay and those who will suffer.

Instead, the northeast treatment plant should be expanded first. Fully operational all year, it would save 60 million gallons per day of groundwater at a fraction of building a new southeast plant.

The southeast plant's main water supply would be from Pine Flat Lake. However, without an unknown and costly water exchange agreement, not one drop can go into central Fresno! It's kind of like we're hearing the now famous statement "we need to pass it so we'll know what's in it" repeated.

Why are the mayor and Fresno City Council asking us to go it alone and recharge an underground water basin with a land area that's over 100 times larger than our city? We're being asked to pay for the recharge of a basin with no walls and where underground water flows like a river.

An almost certain requirement for the city by California's Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA) of 2014 will be more cooperative agreements with the other stakeholders in the Fresno/Clovis metro area.

The two cities, along with FID and the Fresno Metropolitan Flood Control District, can achieve together the object of the mayor's plan to "Recharge Fresno" and can meet the goals of the SGMA with less expense and debt on the city's ratepayers.

Doug Vagim is a former member of the Fresno County Board of Supervisors.