Fergus Morrissey: Salmon experiments continue while our farms beg for water

By Fergus Morrissey

Last year, because of the drought, the city of Orange Cove bought water for drinking. .

CRAIG KOHLRUSS — Fresno Bee file

As reported by fresnobee.com Feb. 18, a team of biologists with the National Marine Fishery Service, an agency of the Department of Commerce's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, placed by bucket brigade 54,000 Feather River Fish Hatchery juvenile salmon into the waters below Friant Dam for a five day "imprint" period.

This exposure is the trick the biologists employ to convince these salmon that Friant Dam is their birthplace and therefore where they must return to spawn when that time comes.

Under this experiment, once the five-day imprinting period was completed, all 54,000 fish were trucked 150 miles downstream of Friant Dam to the San Joaquin River's confluence with the Merced River.

From there, these juveniles are on their own and must navigate through the gauntlet of striped bass-filled waters of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta to the San Francisco Bay.

So goes the latest progress and current status of the San Joaquin River Restoration Program, six years after experimental water releases were repurposed away from the agricultural economy of the southeastern San Joaquin Valley from Chowchilla to Bakersfield, as authorized by the San Joaquin River Restoration Act of 2009.

Even though in 2006 it was envisioned that the restoration program's experiments would be complete by 2015 and the San Joaquin River would be completely "restored," experiments continue.

In fact, it now appears that the program is years, if not decades, away from accomplishing those tasks authorized by

the act — and some troubling realities may threaten the river's ultimate restoration.

Climate change appears to be having an effect in the immediate term, and it seems that the conventional wisdom is that in decades conditions will be much worse.

Fish experiments continue, in spite of the fact that there has been no 2014-15 winter to speak of in California — and that goes for the upper San Joaquin River watershed.

Salmon habitat conditions downstream of Friant Dam lack a cold-water pool, a key to salmon survival. In fact, the temperature of water released into the San Joaquin River below Friant Dam on Feb. 18 this year was the same as it was in mid-April last year when the same experiment was conducted.

This factor explains this year's expedited experiment; water temperatures are warming to a lethal level for juveniles, only it is occurring much quicker than historical observations anticipated, and a full two months earlier than last year.

Fishery biologists expect (hope) that of these 54,000 juveniles brought to Friant from the Feather River Fish Hatchery, then trucked to the Merced River confluence, 50 will return to Friant Dam to spawn three years from now.

In reality, last year's minimal upper San Joaquin River natural flows and high water temperatures would have meant no over-summering salmon population could have survived to migrate out with hopeful 2015 spring pulse flows as temperatures for adult salmon survival surpassed the lethal level in August 2014.

Moreover, it appears there will be no natural pulse flows this spring because of scant snowpack in the upper San Joaquin River watershed, not to mention that water temperatures are already approaching lethal levels and winter is still upon us.

It's clear: There would have been no salmon run to or from Friant Dam this year under natural conditions.

Yet federal biologists are experimentally intervening. They are hatching, raising, trucking, imprinting, trucking again, releasing and hoping the restoration program is successful.

It is a fact that the intention of the San Joaquin River Restoration Program was to restore and maintain in good condition a "historic fishery" (salmon) at Friant Dam.

Success of that intention will be achieved when, on average, 500 salmon return to Friant Dam annually. We all know the reality of things like climate change. We also know what we are seeing on the ground and the fear in the back of our minds.

This drought may persist to the point of bankrupting Friant Division farming and the economy of the east side of the southern San Joaquin Valley.

The salmon restoration program's wheel-spinning is hard to take knowing that the small family farmer is on the brink of becoming a "historic" relic of the good old days.

Fergus Morrissey is engineer manager of the Orange Cove Irrigation District. It serves nearly 28,000 acres and its member farms average 54 acres each.