

Dan Morain: Frank Bigelow is living the drought

By Dan
Morain

Frank Bigelow stood at the bottom of a gully that a few years ago was stocked with largemouth bass, and, more importantly, supplied water for a herd of cattle that numbered 600 head at his O'Neals ranch.

Now, the hull of a small boat rusts at what used to be the shoreline, maybe 20 feet above the gully floor. The pond had been on the Bigelow ranch since at least the 1940s and had never gone dry.

"When this is what you rely on for your cattle, that's not good," Bigelow said. "I've never seen it like this." Bigelow had no choice but to sell three-fourths of his animals.

Bigelow had returned to the ranch from his day job, a 3.5-hour drive to Sacramento. Two shelties and a cat had their way with me, as we talked in his living room. Toys were piled off to a corner, for when the grandchildren visit. He and his wife Barbara's two sons and their wives live up the road. A daughter is in Hawaii.

In a Capitol dominated by city dwellers, Assembly Member Bigelow wears his cowboy hat. Other legislators drive hybrids and sedans and such. His ride is a Ford four-wheel-drive pickup, which is in need of a bath inside and out.

Other legislators talk about the drought. He lives it.

"I don't believe they grasp it. Not yet," he said of many of the legislators.

That's part of his job, as he sees it, to talk a little sense to legislators whose constituents know that water only comes from the tap.

Bigelow, 60, won an Assembly seat in 2012. He intends to remain in office until he's 70, assuming he thinks he is contributing and, he adds, the people want him. Although he's one of 28 Republicans in the 80-seat Assembly, he believes he can get plenty done.

Owing to his ability to play well with others, Bigelow has seats on the budget and appropriations committees, which are the two most important panels, and on the Governmental Organization Commission, which oversees gambling and alcohol, which is a ready source of campaign donations.

Regular Republican donors, such as oil and tobacco companies, help fund his campaigns. Cattle ranchers are a regular source, too. He also gets his share from Democratic mainstays including the Service Employees International Union.

This year, eight of 17 bills he has introduced deal with water in one form or another. One of his bills would require a study to determine whether to declare the Mokelumne River a wild and scenic river, not the sort of notion a red-meat conservative would entertain.

He helped lead opposition last year to the legislation that regulates groundwater, believing it infringes on landowners' rights. He lost that one. He supported the \$7.5 billion water bond that legislators placed on the November ballot and that voters approved.

In his view, the proposed Temperance Flat Dam east of Fresno is a worthy project, but construction could start sooner on Sites Reservoir, planned for west of the Sacramento River in Northern California.

"We need to get started now," he said. "We have to find a place to park the water when it does come."

Bigelow's family has occupied this piece of California 30 miles east of Highway 99 since the 1800s. Old oak trees are surviving, but the bull pines are dying of thirst. Grass here should be knee-high, but instead hugs the ground. That patch of brown there should have been green until the end of May. There used to be a spring by that rock. No more.

The afternoon sky was smoky, odd for this time of year. In almost any other year, the ridge to the east, not far from Yosemite, would be capped with snow. From 40 miles away, the mountains had been baked brown by the sun.

In past generations, people who worked the land would dig maybe 30 feet to find water, then carve out trenches and rely on gravity to transport water from one end of the pastures to the other. Now, one of his wells is 900 feet deep, and it's good for household use, not for his animals.

If there's no more rain this season — and this is past the middle of March — there won't be enough grass for his cattle to graze on and he will have to buy hay.

He'll find a way to make the ranch work. The ranch has been in the family for more than 100 years. He's not about to give up. He has plenty of motivation to make it work, not the least of which is three baby grandchildren and a fourth on the way. And he figures he can get the ears of a few people in positions of power.

Dan Morain is editorial page editor of The Sacramento Bee. Twitter: @danielmorain.