

Water wars: L.A. behemoth sets sights on delta islands

By Peter Fimrite

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Photo: Leah Millis, The Chronicle

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Larry Etherton prepares to unload a transport truck from a ferry to Webb Tract island near Rio Vista.

Grasslands stretch for miles from the quiet, sun-drenched levee road north of Brentwood where Jaime Barajas supervises workers on the nearly 5,500-acre delta island known as Webb Tract.

Corn grown on the sunken, man-made island at the confluence of the San Joaquin and Mokelumne rivers has to be barged to the mainland on a small ferry, one semitruck load at a time. It is one of the Bay Area's most remote and challenging places to farm — and an unlikely fulcrum in an intense fight over the future of California's water supply.

Running Dry: Drought coverage

Barajas manages farming and duck hunting on the Webb and Holland tracts and lives in a ramshackle three-story house on Bouldin Island, just over the Contra Costa County border in San Joaquin County. Those are three of the five

Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta islands that the powerful Metropolitan Water District of Southern California recently announced it is looking to buy.

While Metropolitan's long-term plan is still somewhat murky, it's clear to everyone that acquiring the islands — including Bacon Island in San Joaquin County, and a portion of Chipps Island in Solano County — would give the district more leverage in the bitter battle for delta water, especially if California's four-year drought continues.

But many of the folks who make their living in the delta see the deal as a naked water grab by Los Angeles heavyweights who think they can hip-check local farmers out of the way. For Barajas, the deal would likely end farming on all of the land he manages, putting him out of work after 37 years on the job.

"It's our water," Barajas, 59, said on a recent day as he wore a ball cap and striped railroad conductor overalls and held his faithful companion, a chihuahua mix named Peanuts, in one arm. "We've been farming this land for the last 100 years, as long as the islands have been here."



Photo: Leah Millis, The Chronicle

Above: John Sweeney heads for a boat on Chipps Island near Pittsburg. Chipps, in the Suisun Marsh, is also used for duck hunting.

This isn't the water agency's only move to ensure a water supply for its customers. In July, Metropolitan paid \$256 million to nearly double its land holdings near Blythe, a California city on the Arizona border in Riverside County.

The agricultural land in the area has the highest rights to water from the Colorado River, and Metropolitan pays farmers more than \$700 an acre to allow their water to be shipped to the Los Angeles area.

In the delta, the move this month by the 37-member Metropolitan board of directors to buy 20,369 acres of land in three counties comes as Gov. Jerry Brown seeks approval of his controversial \$17 billion twin tunnels project.

Like '3 little pigs'

Two of the islands — Bouldin and Bacon — are directly in the proposed path of the tunnels, which would divert a portion of the Sacramento River to agencies south, including farms, urban areas in the Bay Area and some of the 19 million customers Metropolitan serves in the Los Angeles area.



Photo: Leah Millis, The Chronicle

John Sweeney drives a boat out of the Pittsburg Marina for a tour of Chipps Island, which is a habitat for wintering and migrating waterfowl.

The tunnels, which would bypass the delta, have created almost as much local outrage as the similarly conceived Peripheral Canal, which voters rejected in 1982.

Supporters say the proposed pipelines would kill fewer fish than existing pumps that take water south, while allowing for restoration of the delta ecosystem. Opponents say they would kill just as many fish and siphon so much more water out of the river that salt water from San Francisco Bay would back up and ruin the wetlands.

“It’s kind of like the story of the three little pigs, and we’re the pig in the brick house and somebody opens the door and lets the wolf in,” said Rudy Mussi, 63, who has farmed his entire life on Union and Roberts islands, which are close to Bacon Island. “If we thought Met was in it for the habitat or creating added (water) storage, we wouldn’t be opposed to it, but they are clearly trying to ease the construction of the tunnels.”

Local water advocates and environmentalists have gone as far as to compare Metropolitan's gambit to "Chinatown," the 1974 Roman Polanski film depicting deceptive and, in some cases criminal, tactics by Los Angeles interests to secure water rights to the Owens Valley, east of the Sierra.



Photo: Leah Millis, The Chronicle

Jaime Barajas, 59, with his dog Peanut, walks along Webb Tract Island near Rio Vista. Webb Tract Island is one of two islands that Barajas manages for a local farmer.

Jeffrey Kightlinger, Metropolitan's general manager, acknowledged the benefits of owning the islands, including the fact that they would come with some coveted historical rights to take water straight from the delta. Also, Kightlinger said, the state wouldn't have to use eminent domain proceedings to acquire the land to make way for the tunnel route

"We're particularly interested in a number of environmental benefits in owning these lands and working on them," he said, referring to the obligation to restore wetlands and wildlife habitat as mitigation for building a pipeline to slurp up delta water.

Water and habitat needs

The current owner of the land, Delta Wetlands Properties, a subsidiary of insurance giant Zurich, recently gained approval to flood Bacon Island and Webb Tract and convert them into reservoirs covering more than 11,000 acres, and to return heavily farmed Bouldin Island and Holland Tract to wildlife habitat.

Metropolitan officials have not committed to those plans, but they appear to meet the district's need for extra water storage and environmental mitigation.

The reservoir plan is possible because the islands are sinking, a result of oxidation of the heavily farmed peat soils. Barajas said Webb Tract is 12 feet below sea level — essentially a bowl protected by dirt levees. Some of the other islands are 20 feet below mean high tide.



Photo: Leah Millis, The Chronicle

Left: For Jaime Barajas, the deal probably would end farming on the land he manages, putting him out of work after 37 years.

The aging dirt levees protecting the islands have long been a topic of concern for geologists, who have warned that an earthquake, heavy storm or even a large gopher colony could cause a breach, resulting in a catastrophic flood.

Still, farmers and their advocates prefer crops to a water reserve for outsiders.

“You would be losing a lot of very valuable farmland,” said George Hartmann, a Stockton attorney who waged a legal battle on behalf of farmers on the McDonald Tract to stop the reservoir plan out of fear that the pressure created by the extra water would undermine neighboring levees and percolate up onto their land.

“Politically, we believe the goal of the Southern California water interests is to destroy the delta as we know it and turn it back into a swamp,” he said. “All they are interested in is getting water out of it.”

The stakes are high because the channels, islands and marshes that make up the delta are a catch basin for the vast majority of California’s drinking water. The 1,300-square-mile network, where the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers come together, was once a vast tule marsh teeming with salmon, grizzly bears and other wildlife, which provided ample food for American Indians.

Killing endangered fish

American settlers began transforming the “swamp land” in the late 1800s and early 1900s, creating a levee system that formed many of the islands. The State Water Project and federal Central Valley Project later designed a system of pumps, aqueducts and concrete bypasses to both prevent flooding and funnel snowmelt from the Sierra Nevada to 25 million people in the Bay Area, Central Valley and Southern California.

The problem is, the huge Tracy-area pumps that suck up delta water also kill baby salmon and the tiny endemic fish known as the delta smelt, which are now on the verge of extinction.

Pumping restrictions have been issued since 2007 to protect the fish. The California Department of Water Resources and other state agencies are also obligated under a 2010 agreement to restore 8,000 acres of intertidal and subtidal habitat for salmon and smelt in the delta, the Suisun Marsh and the Yolo Bypass.

The 30-mile tunnels project, which would run north-south from Merritt Island in Yolo County to just south of Discovery Bay, in Contra Costa County, would bypass the problematic region and presumably take water where fewer fish congregate.



Photo: Leah Millis, The Chronicle

Chippis Island, part of the Suisun Marsh, is waterfowl habitat.

Ironically, the revelation that Metropolitan is interested in the islands may make it more difficult for the state to acquire right-of-way land by creating a mini-real-estate boom in the area. Property on the delta islands that could be had for about \$5,000 an acre two years ago is already going for \$15,000 an acre and up, according to land speculators.

Some anticipated the land rush several years ago and bought property on the islands, which they are now trying to sell for a tidy profit.

“If what they say is true and they actually want to do something with these islands, like restoration, that would be great,” said John Sweeney during a recent tour of the 734 acres of marshlands on Chipps Island.

He and his partners bought the land in 2011 — and now hope to sell it to Metropolitan.

“Most of the reasons why the value of land has gone up is because the delta has water rights,” Mussi said. “People appreciate that, in order to farm in California, you need water.”

There are some Metropolitan supporters hidden among the delta’s hissing masses. Ownership of the islands by such a rich and powerful district, they say, could be just what is needed to improve the environment and fix California’s rickety water distribution system.

Skeptical of promises

Dennis Gardemeyer, the co-owner of 6,200 acres on McDonald Island, said he would like to believe that but knows well the history of the struggle for California’s most precious liquid.

“We here in the delta have been given many, many, many promises by government agencies and districts that take water from us that they have yet to keep,” Gardemeyer said. “Its disconcerting to me that the Met might be propagating more false promises, but I’d like to be a good neighbor, and I hope the Met will be a good neighbor.”

Barajas doesn’t care who owns the land as long as he can still farm.

“It would be cheaper just to build desalination plants than to build those tunnels,” he said as he looked across the fields on the Webb Tract. “But what do I know? I’m just a farmer.”

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