

River Plan Too Fishy for my Taste Buds

By Bill McEwen

Fresno Bee, March 26, 2009

- 1 Here are cautionary words for everyone celebrating congressional approval of San Joaquin River restoration: Watch out for unintended consequences flowing from a flawed plan.
- 2 There are two big problems with the legislation. One, it's tied to putting salmon back in the river. Two, there is no funding for dams or river recirculation technology that would maximize Sierra water runoff and lessen the economic devastation to some San Joaquin Valley farmers.
- 3 To hear the limousine liberals tell it, passage of the half-baked restoration bill was a great moment in California history.
- 4 "Ultimately, restoring salmon to the San Joaquin River is critical to revitalizing California's ailing salmon fishery," Monty Schmitt of the Natural Resources Defense Council said in a news release Wednesday.
- 5 It might work – but only if there's a market for river-broiled salmon.
- 6 No one even knows whether salmon can even survive in the lower San Joaquin, which has temperatures more suitable for bass and bluegill.
- 7 According to the experts at UC Davis studying California's rapidly declining salmon populations; the fish "are exceptionally vulnerable to climate change."
- 8 Salmon need clear, cool, highly oxygenated water to thrive – a description that hasn't fit the San Joaquin since the 1940s. Besides, scientific evidence suggests that California's salmon problems have been caused in large part by oceanic conditions and the environmental mess that is the San Joaquin-Sacramento Delta.
- 9 The reality is, our federal and state governments will spend hundreds of millions – if not billions – of dollars in coming years on a program that will yield a salmon exhibit instead of a sustainable fishery.
- 10 The salmon will be hatchery-raised, few in number and probably protected from fishing. Every couple of years, the media will scurry to take pictures of the San Joaquin salmon kill when fall temperatures soar above 100 degrees.
- 11 The big question is why Congress – including Valley agriculture supporters such as Jim Costa of Fresno and Dennis Cardoza of Merced – would support this boondoggle.
- 12 There are several reasons. The bill was included in legislative package that included many worthwhile projects and was ushered through Congress using special backroom rules designed to protect representatives of the majority party from tough questioning by constituents.
- 13 Costa and Cardoza are Democrats, and the river's restoration was pushed by California Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer, both Democrats and both in the hip pocket of environmentalists.

- 14 In addition, agriculture isn't a monolith. The restoration plan hits some farmers harder than others. After nearly two decades of legal fighting, many of the farmers in the Friant Water Users Authority decided that settling out of court and giving up some water for salmon was smarter than taking their chances with a federal judge.
- 15 Finally, you can't escape the fact that Valley concerns are easily dismissed by leaders in Sacramento and Washington, D.C., says Tim Stearns, director of the Lyles Center of Innovation and Entrepreneurship at Fresno State.
- 16 In a nutshell, Stearns says, people across the country take cheap food for granted.
- 17 "We have a powerful economic engine in regard to food supply that is appropriate to our region," Stearns says. "We need more efforts to capture water – not to divert it."
- 18 "This (restoration plan) would be like diverting silicon chips away from San Jose to make toys instead of computers."
- 19 The shame of it is that river restoration – a worthwhile endeavor – should've never been tied to salmon.
- 20 If the farmers hadn't been so greedy when it came to the river, they could've voluntarily let the lower San Joaquin flow year-round by releasing a modest amount of water and supported the establishment of a trophy trout or bass fishery below Friant.
- 21 Think this idea is far-fetched?
- 22 A voluntary water-release program agreed to by farmers and environmentalists has been going on for nearly a decade on the Kings River. And the river's banks below the dam are lined on weekends with fishermen seeking huge trout.
- 23 Such a plan could've worked on the San Joaquin, as well. Instead, Congress now will spend \$88 million in the first go-around to put thousands of Valley people out of work and to force an overdraft of our ground aquifer by water-thirsty farmers.
- 24 And it's coming at a time when water shortages already are killing the Valley's west-side, farm-based economy.
- 25 Celebrate now, if you wish.
- 26 You won't be celebrating later.
- 27 Says Stearns: "We need a stimulus water package. We're going to have dire poverty."

River Restoration Project Offers a Sprinkling of Hope

By Daniel Weintraub

The Sacramento Bee, April 26, 2009

- 1 When the Chinook salmon come back to the San Joaquin River, it will be a miracle. But the wonder of the river's restoration won't be in the biology involved, which is well established. Or the engineering needed to bring the river back to life. Most of what is required has been done before.
- 2 It's the politics that make this project so remarkable.
- 3 Few issues in California, or anywhere in the West, cause as much bitter division as water. Yet in the foothills east of Fresno and the flatlands stretching toward the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, the warring parties have finally put down their arms and are working together on a project that should benefit the environment, the fishing industry and the local economy. Even the farmers at the heart of it all have signed on to the deal, though many of them still wish they could remain set in their ways.
- 4 Thanks to recent changes in federal law and a commitment of federal money to the project, the San Joaquin River restoration, debated for nearly 20 years, is about to begin in earnest. The first water for the newly re-created river will flow through Friant Dam in October, if all goes according to plan, and it will then flow into parts of the river that have been dry for decades. Within a few years, thousands of salmon should be swimming upstream through what is now a parched valley landscape.
- 5 "When we're done, we'll have a river that can safely convey the flows necessary to restore salmon and other native fish to the river," Monty Schmitt, a biologist with the Natural Resources Defense Council, who has been working on the project for nine years, told me last week. "It means the San Joaquin River is providing fresh water downstream, to the lower San Joaquin and the Delta, stretches of the Central Valley that have water quality issues. We'll actually have a living, connected river."
- 6 "In these years when the salmon populations have been crashing throughout California, when the commercial fishery is closed again, restoring salmon to the San Joaquin River is one of the greatest steps we can take to hopefully revive the commercial salmon industry," Schmitt said.
- 7 Much of what used to be a wild, scenic river has been transformed over the years into a series of channels and canals, with water moving this way and that to irrigate some of the most productive cropland in the country. Citrus, stone fruit, grapes and nuts are grown there now, along with forage crops for the cows that make Tulare County the No. 1 dairy county in the nation.
- 8 Those farms stand to lose as much as 20 percent of their water as the river is restored. But the restoration plan makes it a priority to help them get most of that water back in one way or another. The water district will be allowed to capture more water in flood years and save it for dry years. Canals will be improved and new levies built. New land and new techniques will be employed to store reserves as groundwater that can be pulled back to the surface with wells and pumps.

- 9 There is even a plan to recycle water by taking it back out of the California aqueduct south of Fresno after it flows down the river, through the Delta and becomes part of the state's water system. The same water that restores the salmon could then be pumped back uphill and used again, this time for irrigation.
- 10 "We hope to get double duty out of that water by taking it the long way around," said Ron Jacobsma, general manager of the Friant Water Authority. "We really need to focus on getting that water back. The project has been in operation for over half a century and the whole fabric of the community here has been built on having those reliable water supplies."
- 11 There's a lesson here for combatants on other contentious issues large and small: It's usually better for everyone involved to settle their differences rather than fight to the death.
- 12 At first the farmers fought the lawsuit that sought the river's restoration. After all, it challenged their right to use the water they had been claiming for decades. But once the courts ruled that the river's diversion had endangered the salmon, it became clear that a decision would be issued at some point ordering the restoration. Facing that prospect, the users eventually decided it would be better for them to help shape the plan than to merely suffer its consequences.
- 13 "Our folks needed some certainty," Jacobsma said. "The settlement provides water-supply certainty. It provides financial certainty. They'll be paying no more than what they would have otherwise paid. That would not have been the case if a judge had decided it. And we get an opportunity to get our water back, which we did not think we would get out of a federal court ruling."
- 14 The environmentalists, who brought the lawsuit, once having gained the legal momentum, could have refused to concede any points. But Schmitt said they wanted a settlement that the farmers could believe in.
- 15 "We did it because we felt that a settlement that had everyone on board would be an agreement that everybody could live with, and we could go forward working together," he said. "A court-ordered judgment forcing them to release water would have continued an atmosphere of hostility and anger. It's always better to have a situation where everybody works together."
- 16 Although the agreement was formally placed into federal law when President Barack Obama signed the Omnibus Public Lands Bill in March, the parties had been working on the restoration plan for more than two years, laying the groundwork for the physical changes to come. The next step is for scientists to study those first water releases planned for October to see how the water flows, how wildlife reacts and what engineering changes will be necessary to accommodate the amount of water need to create the salmon fisher.
- 17 The river will not necessarily be restored to its full, natural path along its entire length. Too much has changed in the decades since it was dammed. Along some stretches, canals might still be used to carry the water short distances and to ferry the salmon upstream.

- 18 “We’ve never done anything on this scale,” said Peter Moyle, a UC Davis professor and consultant on the project. “You’ve got 150 miles of river where roughly half of it was drying up every year. The lower-most section has essentially been treated as an agricultural drain.”
- 19 One example: A section of the riverbed near Fresno after the river flows under Highway 99 has a sandy, rocky bottom and has the reputation of being a big sink for water. Nobody knows at this point what is going to happen once the water starts flowing into that sink. Much of it will simply disappear into the ground. And no one knows how long it will take to recharge the groundwater basin so that the earth no longer absorbs all the water put into the river.
- 20 “Some of the initial flows will answer that question,” Moyle said.
- 21 Once that problem and many others are overcome, California’s second longest river will be alive again.
- 22 “That’s going to be an enormous asset for the people who live in the San Joaquin Valley,” Moyle said. “It’s more than just for fish. It’s going to be good for recreation, for all kinds of other endangered species. We’re doing more than just bringing back a few fish into the system. We’re creating a river, and that’s going to be an amazing thing.”