

Other Opinions

Thirst of growers, developers huge threat

Have you heard of the Napa Agreement? Probably not. Last summer, key officials from the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, the California Department of Water Resources, the Westlands Water District, Kern County Water Agency, the Metropolitan



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Water District of Southern California and various 800-pound water gorillas from the big Tulare Lake Basin plantations met secretly in scenic Napa to hammer out a new proposal to dramatically boost exports of Northern California water to the western San Joaquin Valley and Southern California.

Environmentalists and public interest groups concerned about dewatered northern rivers, Delta water quality, the

waste of water to grow surplus crops and uncontrolled urban sprawl in the Southland were shut out of the secret talks.

Out of the Napa negotiations came a plan to boost pumping at the massive state and federal Delta pumps at Tracy from the current 6,680 cubic feet per second to 8,500 cubic feet per second. One cubic foot per second is 450 gallons. The increase would mean an extra 3.8 million gallons a minute from the giant, fish-grinding Tracy pumps.

The Napa Agreement has become a part of the record of decision of the Bay-Delta program known as Cal-Fed, a consortium of state and federal agencies. Cal-Fed's lead agencies are the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and the California Department of Water Resources, which supply several million acre-feet of water a year to San Joaquin Valley agriculture.

Cal-Fed was created a decade ago to "fix"

California's two major water problems: (1) Delta water quality and (2) chronic water shortages south of the Delta. Proponents of the Napa proposition want to boost Delta exports first before the water quality and wildlife issues are resolved.

Critics claim the new plan could increase exports of Northern California water by up to 1 million acre-feet of water, enough water to cover a million football fields a foot deep, and devastate Delta recovery chances. Proponents say the diversions would be much lower in volume, would occur during periods of flood and would not harm the Delta.

Napa Agreement proponents, in a well-orchestrated public relations campaign now under way, like to cleverly label opponents as "perpetually unhappy environmentalists" or "Bay Area radical elitists," ignoring the fact that virtually all of Northern California and the Bay-Delta area, including urban water districts supplying millions of people with Delta drinking water are also highly skeptical about the backroom Napa Agreement.

Seeking a delay

Delta area state Sen. Mike Machado has introduced a bill, Senate Bill 1155, that would block implementation of the Napa Agreement until Delta water quality issues — ranging from improving drinking water quality to restoring healthy fish populations and reducing irrigation water salinity — are resolved. Hearings on Machado's bill will be this spring.

Another "perpetually unhappy environmentalist" is San Joaquin County Board of Supervisors Chairman Leroy Ornellas. Ornellas worries the Napa proposition "could cause serious impacts to the social, economic and environmental viability of the Delta and San Joaquin County."

"To further exacerbate this problem," Ornellas wrote in a letter to state Sen. Chuck

Poichigian of Fresno, "inflow to the Delta from the San Joaquin River now consists primarily of high salt-bearing drainage from farmlands and wetlands in the [Central Valley Project's] west-side service area."

Also lumped into the category of "perpetually unhappy environmentalists" are Indian tribes in Trinity County. They have been waging a 20-year campaign to revive flows in the decimated Trinity River. Water from the river now flows to the Westlands. A plan to restore fishery flows is currently being blocked by a Westlands lawsuit.

Trinity people want the Napa Agreement boosters to drop the sloganeering and name-calling and justify the use of precious Northern California rivers to grow surplus subsidized cotton on more than 700,000 acres of land in the western San Joaquin Valley. They want an explanation of why Northern California counties should keep sending the lifeblood of their rivers south to irrigate high-selenium western Valley farmlands with no drainage solution in sight. They want to know why Northern California should dry up its rivers so developers in Southern California can jam yet another tacky subdivision onto a landslide-prone barren hillside.

It's not the perpetually unhappy environmentalists I'm worried about here in our San Joaquin Valley, where the air grows more poisonous, our children grow more asthmatic, raisin farmers vanish, cotton subsidies grow ever more lavish, poverty and joblessness increase every year, and urbanization gobbles up the Blossom Trail.

I'm worried about the "perpetually thirsty" big west-side growers and Southern California developers who can never get enough of Northern California's liquid treasure and who will engage in smear tactics against anyone who would get in the way of the steamroller driven by the Hydraulic Brotherhood.