

Public's interest can't be ignored in water sell-offs

After 130 years of increasingly intensified irrigation in the San Joaquin Valley, resulting in a cornucopia of food and fiber unequaled in human history, it now appears the most lucrative cash crop may be the irrigation water itself.

Irrigation districts on both sides of the Valley are now contemplating what was unthinkable



LLOYD CARTER
is president of the California Save Our Streams Council.

10 years ago — selling water to Southern California instead of using it for crops. The troubling question raised is whether the public directly benefits from profits off the liquid gold falling on the Sierra every winter in the form of a snowpack. Public water that the public,

through its trustees, gives away

While the 20th century was dominated by Valley agriculture's demand for more publicly funded water storage, a more realistic assessment indicates that oversupply — of everything from grapes and raisins to cotton, tomatoes and almonds — has been the principal problem, not water shortages.

West-side cotton farmers have been struggling with rising production costs, ineffective drainage practices, reduced yields and depressed markets. It now takes \$750 worth of retail water to grow \$150 worth of wholesale cotton. Tomato growers have also fallen on hard times. Raisin and almond farmers have suffered low prices from surpluses. The result is that small farmers keep disappearing and the big operators, strong enough to ride out the low spots, get bigger.

Profitable pact

The Westlands Water District of western Fresno and Kings counties recently proposed a water exchange with the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California in which it will get back more water than it gives plus a very large chunk of cash. Metropolitan is a water wholesaling agency that in turn sells its supply to local water supply districts servicing millions of Southlanders.

The Westlands will exchange, over 30 years, 600,000 acre-feet of its supply in drought years for 660,000 acre-feet from Metropolitan in normal years. In addition, the Westlands will be paid a whopping \$98.7 million over 30 years simply for making its drought year water available. A nice middleman profit.

No surprise, growers on the east side, in the Friant Water Users Authority, comprised of smaller irrigation districts stretching from Madera to Kern counties, have also announced they are interested in talking to Metropolitan about selling water.

And of course Azurix, a subsidiary of the Houston-based energy company, Enron, wants to begin groundwater banking in Madera County and sell the storage of the public's river water to the highest bidder.

Forgotten ... is who owns the water in the first place. The public dispenses this water free through permits issued by the state Water Resources Control Board.

Forgotten in this speculative fever is who owns the water in the first place. The public dispenses this water free through permits issued by the state Water Resources Control Board. The water board now permits the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation to divert for irrigation over 7 million-acre feet of water a year. That is enough to meet the domestic needs of 35 million new Californians.

The federal Bureau of Reclamation's dam and canals, known as the Central Valley Project, stretches from Shasta Dam to Bakersfield. The bureau sells its free water to irrigation districts throughout Central California, which, in turn, sell it to small farmers and large corporate agribusinesses alike.

Changing times

The primary motivation for the water board in giving the free water to the Reclamation Bureau 40 to 60 years ago was to bring arid lands into production and promote family farming. But times change. It is difficult to defend using public water to grow cotton costing 80 cents a pound to produce but selling at 50 to 60 cents a pound. The U.S. government response to frequent surpluses of all crops is subsidy payments totaling many billions of dollars a year nationwide.

Moreover, the environmental damage of such intensive agriculture on 4 million acres of land in the Valley has been undeniable. Virtually every river in the Valley is heavily diverted to meet agricultural demands. The San Joaquin River is dry for 50 miles on the Valley floor and is little more than an agricultural sewer downstream of Merced County.

Delta woes

The Delta continues its decline of fisheries and water quality. Delta farmers complain about poor quality irrigation water from the river. Indeed, concerns about Delta drinking water quality are what prompted Metropolitan to seek the Sierra snow melt.

Let us hope that the state water board, which has neglected its public trust duties for decades while trying to meet all the needs of agribusiness, will finally take steps to restore and protect public trust interests in the rivers — ranging from groundwater recharge for riparian farmers to fisheries and recreation — before the rivers are sold off. These public trust resources remain unprotected in the Valley and Delta. The board, as the public's trustee, should also consider — at public hearings — whether at least a portion of the big profits created by the pending sell-off of the rivers should revert back to the public that gave it away.