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CAPITOL JOURNAL

'Water buffaloes' got it all wrong

Supporters of water development think the fight is between farmers and fish. It's not nearly that simple.

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Capitol Journal

August 20, 2009

From Sacramento

The "water buffaloes" like to frame their fight as farmers vs. fish. It is not. It's about farmers and *fishermen.*

A California water buffalo is someone who instinctively battles to develop water -- so named, I'm told, after the beast that reputedly can smell water from 200 miles away.

The fight isn't necessarily about "versus" either because farmers and fishermen often are in the same boat, dry-docked for lack of water.

Up and down the San Joaquin Valley, farm fields have been fallowed and field hands can't find work because there isn't enough water to irrigate crops.

"I represent communities that are threatened to be blown away like tumbleweeds," Assemblyman Juan Arambula (I-Fresno) complained at a legislative water hearing Tuesday.

Along California's central and northern coasts, salmon season has been closed for the second straight year because, in large part, water conditions have become so mucked up in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta that baby fish can't survive before heading to sea.

Commercial fishermen and their crews can't work. Recreational anglers can't fish, hurting charter boat owners.

"The delta is a black hole" for salmon, legislators were told by Zeke Grader, executive director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Assns.

The Sacramento-San Joaquin river system -- encompassing California's Central Valley -- historically has been the second-largest salmon producer on the West Coast, second only to the Columbia River. And Columbia salmon tend to migrate north to British Columbia and Alaska. Salmon that make it through the delta and out the Golden Gate have supplied 90% of the catch off California, and 50% off Oregon.

The delta also is the largest estuary on the West Coast of America, north and south, Grader said in an interview.

"Estuaries are places where salmon gain strength before going to sea," he continued. "We've been seeing salmon actually losing weight in the delta. They become weakened, get lost because of [reverse river] flows, become entrained

in pumps or wind up in forebays where they're easy prey to predator fish."

What Grader describes is pretty much the fault of water management in the delta during the past half-century -- something all sides currently are trying to fix.

In 1950, more than 1 million chinook salmon -- also called king salmon -- returned during the fall to spawn in the Sacramento-San Joaquin system. Last fall, only 66,000 returned.

There also have been some good spawning runs -- notably in 2002, after a few wet winters, when 880,000 salmon showed up. But generally, there has been a gradual decline in Central Valley salmon over the last 60 years.

Blame construction of dams that blocked access to ancestral spawning streams and the introduction of giant fish-chomping delta pumps that reverse river flows while diverting water south to irrigate San Joaquin Valley fields and fill Southern California reservoirs. Pour in a toxic brew of pesticide runoff from farm fields and inadequately treated waste water from cities such as Sacramento and you've got a fish death trap.

So it's not just about cotton, cherries and citrus. It's about chinooks. Also huge sturgeon and striped bass. They've gotten sick on delta water too.

Some water buffaloes belittle the striped bass because they're not a native species. But they've lived in the delta for 130 years, which makes them a native by California standards. And let's not even get into which crops are native to California.

And, oh yes, there's the pesky delta smelt -- called the "canary in the coal mine," or, more aptly, "black hole" -- that water buffaloes love to hate.

The tiny fish is officially listed as endangered. So federal courts have cut back on delta water exports to save the critter. That has San Joaquin Valley farmers and farm workers marching and protesting during this third year of drought. They've found a sympathetic listener in the governor's office.

"We have to go to the federal government and get this judge off our backs so that we can open the pumps and give water to the farmers," Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger told me in April. "If I have a choice between the fish and the farmer, I choose the farmer. I choose the food that feeds the world."

As if salmon weren't worth eating.

Schwarzenegger sounded like a buffalo again on Tuesday when he denounced federal judges who "make decisions based on what's best for the fish rather than what's best for people."

Fishermen aren't people, presumably, in the governor's definition.

But fishermen these days bear a striking resemblance to fallowing farmers -- as delta salmon go the way of smelt.

Schwarzenegger talked about fish vs. people as he vowed not to sign any delta-fix legislation that doesn't include bonds for dams. The governor has lobbied unsuccessfully in recent years for a water bond issue of roughly $10 billion.

Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg (D-Sacramento) told me he could perhaps support a water bond in the $3-billion to $4-billion range.

Democrats have proposed a legislative package that, among other things, would create a powerful, independent council to decide how to repair and replumb the delta, making it more fish-friendly and more reliable as a water deliverer.

The delta is now dangerously vulnerable to floods or an earthquake that could topple levees, cutting off drinking water for 24 million people and irrigation for 3 million acres.

If that catastrophe occurs, you'll see the return of the fish -- but an estimated $40 billion loss to the California economy,

buffaloes included.

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