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Water delivery plan for SoCal meets resistance

NoCal farmers angry about proposed delta canal

SAMANTHA YOUNG - Associated Press | Posted: Saturday, October 3, 2009 7:20 pm

CLARKSBURG ---- Peter Hunn has a simple wish: He'd like his children to farm the land in California's delta that his great, great grandfather settled more than a century ago.

The cucumber farmer cherishes the land so much that he refuses to allow state engineers onto his property to survey possible routes for a new canal he believes could disrupt his water supply. Hunn and 160 other landowners along this fertile stretch of land between San Francisco and the state capital are joined in a revolt against the canal that has evolved into something of a modern-day sagebrush rebellion.

"All the pumps and systems to get water out of the river and put in a canal will have to be done in our area. They will reduce the quality of the water," said Hunn, who lives outside Clarksburg, a former sugar beet town just south of Sacramento. "We'd be displaced and have to figure out a whole new life."

The state's surveys are critical to determining whether a canal is viable. That it is having so much trouble even getting on the delta's ranches and vineyards illustrates the political challenges in trying to reshape California's aging water system.

The canal "would transform the delta from a freshwater estuary and a thriving farming community into a salty polluted inland sea," charges Barbara Barrigan-Parrilla, campaign director at Restore the Delta, a nonprofit community group that has vocally opposed the canal at community meetings and legislative hearings.

The state, for its part, has filed 161 suits seeking temporary access to the lands where owners have refused entry.

The farmers, sports fishermen and other vested interests focus their anger on the belief that a canal would siphon fresh water around their region to the south, leaving the remaining water unfit for farming, with too little fresh water to mix with the salt water pushing upriver from San Francisco Bay.

The Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta is where runoff from the Sierra Nevada meets the tidewater from the bay. It's rivers, levee roads and islands form the largest estuary on the West Coast and occupies a land mass roughly the size of Rhode Island.

The delta is one of California's most productive agricultural regions where acres of asparagus, pears, wine grapes and field crops like corn dominate the landscape. It is also among the most important ecosystems along the Pacific Coast. Some 750 plant and animal species, including federally protected Chinook salmon and the imperiled delta smelt, live in or pass through the web-like topography of rivers, marshes and sloughs.

That environmental wonderland also is the heart of California's water-delivery system, acting as the conduit of drinking and irrigation water for some 25 million residents and thousands of acres of farmland.

As a result, it has become a focal point of conflict.

The massive pumps built on the southern end of the delta to send water to Southern California. San Francisco Bay area water agencies and Central Valley farmers actually reverse the delta's natural flow, one factor cited by a federal judge who found the pumps were contributing to the decline of the threatened delta smelt.

At the same time, pesticides, fertilizers and other pollutants are worsening water quality, forcing water agencies to spend millions on treatment systems. Its miles of earthen levees, many dating to the 19th century, also are susceptible to failure during earthquakes or floods. One broken levee could disrupt the water supply to Southern California for months.

Three years of below-average rainfall have led to cuts in water deliveries so severe that Central Valley farmers have been forced to fallow thousands of acres.

Given the array of problems, Southern California water agencies and farmers in the Central Valley prefer to bypass the delta by directly tapping the Sacramento River and sending 15,000 cubic feet per second into a canal. And the Schwarzenegger administration, which favors the plan, has determined that the state has the authority to build the canal without legislative or voter approval.

"There is the great potential that just pursuing the status quo means irreversible harm to the economy of the state of California and the environment," state water director Lester Snow has said.

And not all delta landowners are opposed to the new canal, including some of those who helped defeat a similar proposal in 1982.

"We've hashed this out over the years," Paul Sosnowski said of his neighbors on the delta island where he owns two marinas. "Most of us want to see what the science is, and if it makes sense, we are all for it."

Sosnowski was one of 150 landowners who granted the state permission to survey, according to DWR.

State and federal water managers, the Southern California Metropolitan Water District, the Central Valley's Westlands Water District and others who would benefit have offered to pay for its construction, estimated at $4.2 billion to $7.4 billion.

This canal they envision is much smaller that the 1982 proposal, but it still would have a large footprint ---- 540 feet wide and stretching nearly 50 miles long.

The Nature Conservancy, which owns nearly 11,000 acres in the delta for farming and wildlife, became the first major national environmental group earlier this year to endorse the canal, saying it is the only hope for restoring damaged ecosystems, habitats and "flow regimes."

Ralph Wallace, a real estate agent who has lived in the delta since 1977, wants to make sure the state is also taking care of him and his neighbors.

"I understand Southern California needs water, but people in Northern California, including myself, don't want it to be at our expense," he said. "If they take something from us, they've got to give us something in return."