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The California Water Wars: Not A Conflict Between Fish and People

by Dan Bacher

Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, the California Department of Water Resources and corporate agribusiness have continually tried to frame the battle over restoring the California Delta and Central Valley rivers as one of “fish versus people.” This false dichotomy was exemplified by an article published in the Sacramento Bee, “Delta cutbacks put Valley farm town on edge,” by Susan Ferris on Monday, March 2.

The reporter interviewed people in the agricultural industry in Mendota on the San Joaquin Valley’s west side discussing their fears over unemployment, due to cuts in irrigation water deliveries from the Delta that are being blamed on court ordered reductions in water exports to save salmon and Delta smelt. These fears are real, due to poor planning by the state and federal governments, who drained Shasta, Oroville and Folsom reservoirs to record low levels over the past two below-normal water years rather than conserving water like they should have.

“They’re worrying about the fish but not about the humans’ life,” said Jose Ruiz, 42, a foreman at a vegetable firm in Mendota, as quoted by Ferriss.

Unfortunately, this characterization of the battle to save the Delta as a one of “people versus fish” couldn’t be further from the truth. Because of massive exports of water to the Westlands Water District and Kern County and the Governor’s plan to build a peripheral canal to divert even more water, thousands of jobs are threatened as they never have been before! These include thousands of jobs in the recreational and commercial fishing industries, the tourist industries of coastal and Sacramento Valley communities, and on Delta and Sacramento Valley farms.

This is not an issue of “fish versus people versus fish” nor “fish versus jobs.” The battle to save the Delta, the largest estuary on the West Coast of the Americas, really comes down to a conflict between a future based on sustainable fishing, farming and recreation or a future based on corporate agribusiness irrigating toxic, drainage impaired land that should have never been farmed at the expense of Delta and Sacramento Valley farms and healthy fisheries.

Recreational and commercial fishing in California are largely dependent upon the health of the California Delta since the Central Valley Chinook salmon run, the driver of West Coast salmon fisheries, migrates through the estuary both as juveniles going out to the ocean and as adults coming back to the rivers to spawn. The Bay-Delta estuary also supports an array of species, including native species such as California halibut, herring, Dungeness crab, delta smelt, longfin smelt, Sacramento splittail, white sturgeon, green sturgeon and starry flounder, as well as introduced fish including striped bass, black bass, and white catfish.

Another Year of Salmon Fishing Closures Loom

The recent biological opinion by the National Marine Fisheries Service stated that Delta pumping and Central Valley dam operations pose “jeopardy” to the continued existence of Central Valley salmon, green sturgeon and the southern resident population of killer whales.

The closure of salmon fishing in ocean waters off California and Oregon in 2009 was economically devastating to coastal communities. The shutdown of recreational salmon fishing on Central Valley rivers, with the exception of a two-month season on a short stretch of the Sacramento, was equally devastating to Sacramento Valley communities.

The states of Washington, Oregon and California estimated damages to the fishing industry to total \$290 million last year because of the ocean and river salmon closures. This prompted the Governors of California, Oregon and Washington to request a federal disaster declaration that then Secretary Carlos Gutierrez issued in May. Congress allocated \$170 million in disaster relief to fishermen and fishing related businesses so that they could make boat payments, insurance payments, mortgage payments and keep food on the table. The forecast this year is for another very poor return of Sacramento fall Chinook but a healthy return of Klamath River fall

Chinook, according to the Pacific Fishery Management Council (PFMC), the federal body that crafts West Coast salmon and groundfish seasons every year. Only 66,264 adult fall Chinooks returned to the Sacramento River basin in 2008, the lowest spawning escapement on record. It is expected that commercial and recreational salmon fishing in the ocean off California and Oregon will be closed again this year.

The 2009 forecast for Sacramento River Fall Chinook is 122,196 absent any fishing. “This is at the bottom end of the spawning escapement goal range of 122,000-180,000 adult natural spawning and hatchery fish,” according to a statement from the PFMC. “The 2009 forecast compares to the 2008 forecast of 54,600. While roughly twice the abundance of last year’s unprecedented low, this would be the third lowest return since 1992-3.” “This is grim news for the State of California,” emphasized Council Chairman Don Hansen. “We won’t be able to talk about this without using the word ‘disaster.’ There has been a tremendous appeal from people in Fort Bragg, California for at least some sort of Chinook season to target the healthy Klamath runs in 2009, and people on the central Oregon coast have been asking for a fishery on just hatchery-origin coho. But that was before this forecast was released.”

He said the Council process will consider the pros and cons of this issue “thoroughly” at their meetings in March and April. Klamath River fall Chinook are forecast to be at a level of 81,000 fish prior to any fishing, compared to a natural spawner floor of 35,000 and a goal of 41,700 to produce the maximum sustainable number of fish.

California - Number One In Commercial Fishing and Number Three in Recreational Fishing.

The ridiculousness of portraying the California Water Wars as a conflict between “fish and jobs” becomes even more apparent when one considers the data released in a new economic report released by the National Marine Fisheries Service that lists California as the number one state for commercial fishing jobs and income and number three state for recreational fishing. The report says U.S. commercial and recreational fishing generated more than \$185 billion in sales and supported more than two million jobs in 2006. The commercial fishing industry generated \$103 billion in sales, \$44 billion in income and supported 1.5 million jobs in 2006, the most recent year included in the report, “Fisheries Economics of the United States, 2006,” which covers 1997 to 2006. Recreational fishing generated \$82 billion in sales, \$24 billion in income, and supported 534,000 jobs in 2006. The highest amount of sales generated by the commercial fishing industry were in California (\$9.8 billion), Florida (\$5.2 billion), Massachusetts (\$4.4 billion), Washington (\$3.8 billion), and Alaska (\$3 billion). The most jobs were generated in California (179,000), Florida (103,000), Massachusetts (83,000), Washington (75,000) and Texas (47,000).

Recreational fishing generated its highest economic effect in total sales and jobs generated in Florida (\$7.6 billion sales, 131,000 jobs); Texas (\$2.2 billion sales, 34,000 jobs); California (\$1.9 billion sales, 23,000 jobs); North Carolina (\$1.2 billion sales, 24,000 jobs); and Louisiana (\$1.2 billion sales, 27,000 jobs). Fisheries Economics of the United States, 2006 is available online at: <http://www.st.nmfs.noaa.gov/st5/index.html>. Is the cost of destroying the thousands of jobs provided to the economy by California and Oregon fisheries, the tourist industry, and Delta and Sacramento Valley farms worth providing subsidized water to corporate agribusiness to irrigate toxic, drainage impaired land on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley? South Delta farmer Alex Hildebrand put the current Delta fish and water quality declines and the effort to build a peripheral canal into the historical perspective of the rise and collapse of civilizations in his recent speech at the recent Restore the Delta symposium in Lodi.

“Societies rise, flourish and eventually crash because they misuse their water,” said Hildebrand. “As those ancient civilizations fell, they trashed their environment.”

For more information about what you can do to save Central valley salmon, southern resident killer whales and the Delta, go to [http:// www.calsport.org](http://www.calsport.org), <http://www.water4fish.org> and [http:// www.restorethedelta.org](http://www.restorethedelta.org).