Are we running out of water?

Locally and statewide, we can't agree on how to respond to dwindling supplies

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By Robert Speer

The Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, the largest estuary on the Pacific Coast, provides habitat for 700 native plant and animal species. Experts agree it is in serious, long-term crisis. Fish are declining, its levees are weak, global warming threatens rising sea levels, and water quality is worsening.

Have you seen Lake Oroville lately? If so, you know California is running out of water. Reservoir levels are at historic lows, demand is at historic highs, we're in the third year of a drought, salmon populations are crashing, the Delta is in decline, and global warming promises to make things even worse.

It's against that backdrop that the Butte Environmental Council filed a lawsuit Oct. 27 challenging Butte County's approval of a groundwater monitoring program that BEC worries is a prelude to sending North State water to points south.

The lawsuit is a reminder—as if we needed one—that water, whether for drinking, irrigation or fish, remains a huge and controversial issue in California.

It's never long out of the news, either. Just last month Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger unveiled his $9.3 billion water storage and Delta protection plan, called Delta Vision. And last week PacifiCorps, the Warren Buffett-owned utility company, agreed to tear down four dams on the Klamath River, which will be the largest decommissioning in American history if it happens.

BEC's suit challenges the county's approval of a mitigated negative declaration—that full environment review is not required—for its plan to use monitoring wells and production-well drawdowns to study the Tuscan Aquifer, the groundwater reservoir below Butte and three other Sacramento Valley counties.

To the county, the project is simply research to find out what impacts pumping out the water would have on nearby stream flows and how quickly the aquifer recharges. The goal, said Vickie Newlin, assistant director of the county's Water and Resource Conservation department, is to be able to protect local water, if necessary. "If someone wants to come and take our water, we want to have facts. If we don't have that information, we're just shooting in the dark."

The project calls for a number of monitoring wells to be drilled in the vicinity of existing agricultural production wells that are proximate to streams. Monitors will be installed in the waterways to measure their flows. In the spring, before irrigation begins and when the aquifer is at its highest level, the production wells

will be run continuously for 10 days to measure aquifer drawdown and impacts on the nearby streams. Afterwards, the monitoring wells will show how quickly the aquifer recharges.

All of the pumped water will remain on the land served by the wells, Chris Thomas, an associate planner with the county, stated. How the project's data will be used remains to be seen, he added. If a decision is someday made to send water out of the county, full environmental review under the California Environmental Quality Act will be required.

As the old saying goes, however, "water runs uphill toward money." BEC is convinced that the project is part of a scheme being propagated right now to sell groundwater to water districts farther south.

"While Butte County seeks to pass off this 'research' project as a tool to simply understand local hydrology, a paper trail illustrates the county's continuing participation with the state and federal governments to provide area water to users south of the Delta," states a press release announcing the lawsuit.

The Chico-based environmental group points out that funding for the project came only after the county approved the Sacramento Valley Integrated Regional Water Management Plan. By doing so, the county directly aligned itself "with the goal to use massive quantities of local groundwater to augment the state water supply."

Several counties are undertaking aquifer study projects. Earlier this year, BEC filed a similar suit against the Glenn-Colusa Irrigation District, charging that its plan to sink seven deep production wells to test drawdown was part of a scheme to ship water south. A Glenn County judge rejected the suit.

Newlin said the county intended to go ahead with the project, which is just getting under way, despite BEC's lawsuit. "If we need to do more environmental review, we'll do it," she said. "It's unfortunate we have to fight on the side."

BEC did not return a call seeking comment.

Meanwhile, in October the Delta Vision Blue Ribbon Task Force released a controversial strategic plan recommending the construction of two more dams with reservoirs—one of them the proposed Sites Reservoir west of Maxwell—and an updated version of the peripheral canal California voters rejected in 1982.

The idea behind Delta Vision, its proponents say, is to increase the water supply while furthering ecosystem restoration in the estuary, the largest on the Pacific Coast. "The Delta as we know it today is not sustainable," said Phil Isenberg, a former state senator who chaired the task force, during a press conference for the rollout of the report.

Currently water in the Sacramento River flows into the Delta from the north and then is pulled, via giant pumps, into a conveyance system that sends it south. Unfortunately, the pumps also pull in a lot of endangered fish, the Delta smelt, and a federal court judge has cut back on the amount of pumping by 25 or 30 percent to protect the fish. The pumps also upset the ecological balance of the Delta.

The task force's idea is to create a "dual conveyance" system that will send some of the water through the Delta in the usual way and some via a new canal that will skirt the Delta on its eastern side. The additional storage at Sites is meant to save wet-year water for use during dry years.

Delta Vision has the backing of U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein, which gives it some political oomph, but the cost is high, especially when the state is in fiscal crisis. Schwarzenegger hopes to rally agribusiness and its supporters to get a $9.3 billion bond measure on the June ballot. His argument—and the task force's—is that California simply cannot meet its future water needs without increased storage facilities and a better conveyance system.

There are a lot of people—environmentalists, Indian tribes, fishing groups—who oppose any new canal, seeing it as having the potential to reduce inflows to the Delta to harmful levels. And many Northern Californians worry that it will enable the state to ship more water south at a time when it is becoming increasingly scarce here.

The solution to the state's water problems isn't more dams and reservoirs or a peripheral canal. The solution, in a word, is: conservation.

That was the message Conner Everts, of the Southern California Watershed Alliance, delivered Oct. 23 when he spoke about water sustainability at the Chico Grange Hall.

With supplies dwindling, Southern Californians are being forced to do better at saving water than people in the North State realize, Everts said. Using conservation and reclamation, they've reduced their use of imported water to only half their total. The rest is being conserved and reclaimed, whether by capturing storm water, irrigating lawns with gray water or treating sewage until it's cleaner than tap water.

Everts is part of a movement that believes the first response to decreasing water supplies is proper stewardship. If Californians simply stopped wasting water, they wouldn't need more dams and reservoirs.

He cited a recent report from the Pacific Institute, an Oakland-based environmental research group, which found after a three-year study that

“California can cut its urban water use by a third through efficient technology, simple changes in policy, and improved education,” in the words of its president, Dr. Peter H. Gliek.

More important, since three-fourths of the state’s water is used for irrigation, agriculture can reduce its use by exercising good water stewardship, Everts said. Indeed, with dwindling supplies caused by natural conditions as well as court actions such as the 2004 decision requiring restoration of water flow to the San Joaquin River below Friant Dam, it will have no choice but to do so.

Another Pacific Institute study, funded by the Hewlett and Packard foundations and released in September, found that “agricultural water-use efficiency can be improved through careful planning, adopting existing, cost-effective technologies and management practices, and implementing feasible policy changes.”

“Water savings achieved through conservation and efficiency improvements are just as effective as new, centralized water storage, and are often less expensive,” said Dr. Juliet Christian-Smith, co-author of the report. They could save “between three and 20 sizable new dams with fewer social and environmental impacts,” she added.

Many small-scale farmers are already implementing water-saving tools with great success, but the political clout remains with the huge agribusiness outfits that prefer what for them is the easy fix—new dams and a peripheral canal. Whether voters will support them by authorizing funding remains to be seen.