

The Sentinel

Local Guest Commentary: We need to fight for the Valley

By Rep. Jim Costa

A handful of extreme environmentalists and their supporters must not be allowed to dictate our Valley's future. Make no mistake, that is the fight taking place right now.

It is a fight we are going to win. But it is not a fight that will be won easily.

Policymakers, armed with one-sided and deeply flawed environmental opinions, are intent on diverting water away from our Valley -- no matter how it affects the people who live here.

Recent rains have fully replenished the snowpack that feeds our streams and rivers. Many regions of California are expecting their full water supply.

And yet the Valley could get 10 percent or less of our contracted water.

This continued water cut-off will make life even worse for farmworker families who have been suffering the Katrina-like impacts of the drought for years. And it will hurt a local economy experiencing up to 40 percent unemployment in some areas.

And yet, when Sen. Dianne Feinstein, Rep. Dennis Cardoza and I announced plans to push a stopgap amendment to raise our water allocation from 10 percent to 40 percent over the next two years, there was an explosion of indignation from the environmental elite.

Water wars are not new in California nor the Valley. I have been fighting for solutions for years. We simply cannot get by much longer without answers for a crumbling infrastructure barely able to keep up water delivery to a majority of Californians.

But we also need short-term help in the Valley right now. Instead, we continue to run up against a legion of people, most of whom do not live here or know us, who have another agenda and different values.

So far, their main weapon against us has been so-called "biological opinions" which form the basis for enforcement of environmental regulations intended to save dwindling fish populations.

The trouble is, these biological opinions are totally one-sided. They deal only with cutting off our water and flushing it to the ocean to save the fish. They ignore all the fish-killing poisons being dumped into the delta -- some from as far away as the oil refineries in Contra Costa and Solano counties.

No wonder the fish they want to save continue to die. In the meantime, so does our local economy.

With this year's storms and above-average run-off expected, there is no reason state and federal water projects should not be running at full capacity. Instead, because of inflexible restraints on the pumps, we are losing 10,000 to 18,000 acre-feet of water per day. This is water that could be stored in the San Luis reservoir and used for water deliveries later this year.

That adds up to nearly 1 million acre-feet of water lost in the next four months -- with no benefit to the delta or our Valley families -- unless changes are made now.

Our amendment is a small step in the right direction. It is also part of a larger fight. We will continue working to reach solutions with everyone involved in California water to keep the pumps running and improve delta health.

We will also continue confronting the lack of effort from California's Bay Area Congressional delegation who are doing the bidding for extreme environmentalists who do not have the Valley's best interest at heart.

Frankly, I am stunned that people who are so sympathetic to the plight of Katrina flood victims can be so callous about the lives of Valley residents suffering Depression-era unemployment compounded by policies they promote.

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