

Whose fault is the drought?

By Robert Pyke

In the Sacramento Bee's Capitol Alert of February 12, 2014, under the heading "Neel Kashkari blames Jerry Brown for drought", it is reported that Neel Kashkari, one of the Republican candidates for Governor, had said on KMJ 580 radio that a "lack of leadership in Sacramento" has left the state unprepared for dry years. That may be true, but it is hardly fair to blame the current Governor for failing to solve in three years a problem that has been decades in the making.

What is fair, however, is to ask why Governor Brown has stuck with the Bay Delta Conservation Plan (BDCP) as the answer to California's water supply reliability and Bay Delta ecosystem problems. This after all was a process started in the Schwarzenegger administration that was originally supposed to have reached a Record of Decision before Governor Schwarzenegger left office, but did not. It was clear to people who were following it closely at that time that the BDCP could not be completed as planned because the "effects analysis" showed that the project had very uncertain, if any, benefits for listed species.

To be sure, the Brown Administration has rearranged what they inherited somewhat, including reducing the number of intakes on the Sacramento River from five to three, but these changes do nothing to improve water supply reliability and the "effects analysis" still does not show the benefits that are required to obtain incidental take permits. Most importantly, the BDCP still does not address the most fundamental issues involved in water supply reliability and Bay Delta ecosystem restoration, including how to manage our way through future droughts.

It is often said that the basic problem in California water management is that two-thirds of the precipitation falls in the northern half of the State while two-thirds of the population live in the southern half of the State. That is an oversimplification but is generally correct. What is usually neglected, however, is that precipitation is not evenly distributed over time but tends to come in bunches of wetter than normal years and then bunches of drier than normal years (droughts). This is just as important as the geographical distribution of precipitation.

The basic problem that has caused the degradation of the Delta from an estuary to a weedy lake is lack of flows, particularly in drier than normal years. Yes, other factors have contributed to the decline of the Bay Delta ecosystem but fish live in water and native fish, not surprisingly, prefer the flows, temperatures and turbidities in which they have evolved. No amount of improperly located "habitat" can restore the Bay Delta ecosystem without more natural flows.

Thus, any well thought out plan for addressing the State-mandated co-equal goals of reliable water supply and ecosystem restoration must prioritize provision of more natural flows through the Delta, both in pattern and quantity, and extraction of more water during periods of high flow. Much less, or zero, water should be extracted during periods of low flow. The water that is surplus over current needs that is extracted during periods of high flows should then be used to recharge the groundwater basins in the San Joaquin Valley that over time have been pumped ever lower and lower. Unless these basins are recharged, San Joaquin Valley agriculture is headed for oblivion.

Surprisingly, the BDCP does nothing to address these two basic principles. It neither provides more natural flows through the Delta nor provides for extracting more water at periods of high flows and storing the surplus over current needs for future dry years. Jeff Kightlinger of the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California says, correctly, that Metropolitan does not need more storage because they have done a very good job of building or acquiring more storage since the drought of 1986-1992, but should Metropolitan dictate statewide water policy? Apparently they do, because the BDCP is more about Metropolitan obtaining improved water quality from new intakes on the Sacramento River in the North Delta than anything else.

So, while it is silly to blame Governor Brown for the drought, it is fair to question why he did not evaluate the BDCP more critically before adopting it for what can only be political reasons. That's understandable, but real leadership would give at least some weight to technical considerations, such as coping with droughts, in addition to political considerations.

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