

Viewpoints: Don't let growers grab water with their distortions

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Although California farmers already use 80 percent of California's developed water supply, it's not enough for San Joaquin Valley farmers. In congressionally proposed legislation, the San Joaquin farmers would promote themselves from junior water contract positions to the head of the line in water rights, would bypass existing environmental protections and negate a major river restoration project in order to provide themselves with increased amounts of water.

It's a water grab of monumental proportions that is being justified by Valley farmers and politicians in Congress who claim "the tragedy of a man-made drought," a "devastated Central Valley," "massive unemployment" and fields "utterly decimated by current government policies." But facts are stubborn things, as President Ronald Reagan reminded us. So let's examine the facts:

- Although the natural drought that prevailed for three years is over, the elected representatives from the San Joaquin Valley would like to blame their reduced water supplies on Delta pumping restrictions. The restrictions that have been put in place by federal administrators in order to protect endangered fish amount to a 15 percent reduction in supplies for Valley farmers, which is less than the natural variation they receive between wet and dry years. But the farmers' spin on this is that it is a "man-made drought," forced on them by the government's endangered species restrictions.
- Farmers in the San Joaquin Valley are thriving. Their crop production during the last decade has steadily increased from \$14.4 billion to \$22.1 billion in 2009, with a small dip in 2009 from the previous year. That hardly qualifies as a "devastated Central Valley" as indicated by U.S. Rep. Tom McClintock, R-Elk Grove, at a recent hearing. General Motors or Chrysler would like to post those kinds of results.
- "Massive unemployment" in the San Joaquin Valley, as indicated by Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Visalia, the sponsor of this legislation, certainly resonates with people in the Valley. However, unemployment in the Valley has been shown by local university studies to be related to the overall economy and the collapse of the construction industry in the Valley. The amount of jobs lost attributed to a reduced water supply is approximately 2,000. The "massive unemployment" cited by Nunes cannot be attributed to reduced water supplies. Facts are stubborn things.
- Farming on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley, especially in the Westlands Water District – the largest water district in the country – has always been profitable for the 300 farmers who own the 600,000 acres in this district. However, a large share of the acreage has poor drainage and is hampered by high salt and harmful selenium content in their fields. For quite a few years, the Westlands Water District – to its credit – has been following approximately 100,000 acres of these unproductive lands and using the allocated water on more productive acreage. McClintock's characterization of "fields utterly devastated by current policies" is a grossly misleading characterization of these fallowed fields.
- When the Friant Dam was built by the federal government in 1942 on California's second largest river – the San Joaquin – farmers appropriated the flow of the river mainly for irrigation. As a result, the San

Joaquin River dried up for about 60 miles below the dam and the once abundant salmon runs on the river went extinct. A lawsuit by the Natural Resources Defense Council – one of the "radical environmentalists" inferred by McClintock – resulted in a court ruling and a legal settlement to restore flows to the river to try to recover a part of the salmon run.

The settlement will cost the Friant Water District about 15 percent of its current water supplies while restoring some environmental balance to the use of San Joaquin River water. Friant water users have resented that legally required settlement and now have the opportunity – through this legislation – to overturn that "boondoggle," as it was described by McClintock.

Although this legislation can be characterized as a tea party type of reaction to the onerous restrictions placed on industry by government, the continuous supply of subsidized water provided by government water projects is the main reason that we have a farming industry in the San Joaquin Valley.

This legislation should not be allowed to proceed; it has specific provisions that would suspend endangered species and habitat protections for the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta in order to provide increased water for irrigation; it would overturn the water rights of legally established senior water rights holders and turn them over to more junior farmers in the San Joaquin Valley, pre-empting California law in the process; it would undo a legally supervised recovery of one of the major rivers in California.

While the farmers in the Valley may have some legitimate gripes with state and federal water policies, this misdirected legislation is a reminder of the avarice and greed practiced by banks and financial institutions that led to the 2008 crash.

A water grab of these proportions cannot be tolerated by California taxpayers.

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