

The Modesto Bee

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Posted on Mon, Nov. 29, 2010

Westlands Water District pulls out of delta planning

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last updated: November 29, 2010 06:43:44 AM

FRESNO — After investing millions of dollars, Westlands Water District is pulling out of an extensive planning effort to heal the troubled Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, saying high-ranking federal officials are derailing it.

The draft of the Bay Delta Conservation Plan offers hope of restoring slumping water deliveries to west valley farmers, Westlands officials said last week, but the Department of Interior advocates more limits on deliveries.

"We're not going to spend another dime on this," said Jean Sagouspe, Westlands board president. "They changed the goals because they didn't like what the studies say."

Sagouspe wrote a letter last week to Interior Department Deputy Secretary Dennis Hayes, saying federal officials are sending the message that they will limit water exports even if the ecosystem would not be harmed.

Interior officials said the Westlands claim is baseless. No additional restrictions have been proposed, they said. The planning process is expected to last until late 2012 or 2013.

In a response letter, Hayes wrote that the conservation plan is too important for Westlands to leave now.

"It will be a disservice to all involved if Westlands prematurely walks away from the process based on unfounded conclusions or the mere fact that a range of operational criteria are being reviewed," he wrote.

The exchange between the district and Interior is among many disagreements over the delta, dating to restoration efforts in the 1990s.

Environmentalists and fishing groups are involved, too. This month they criticized the draft conservation plan as a water grab for users such as Westlands and Metropolitan Water District of Southern California.

The goals of the 50-year recovery plan are to restore the delta ecosystem, where several fish species are dying, and build a tunnel system to deliver Sacramento River water under or around the delta to farm and city water users.

Cities, environmentalists fret over tunnel

Environmentalists and delta cities are worried about the draft plan's tunnel options, which could carry the Sacramento River's entire flow, according to experts. They want assurances that there would be limits on the amount of water that could be sent.

Westlands and other farm water districts, which irrigate more than 2.5 million acres with delta water, have suffered delivery cutbacks in the past several years because of drought and fish protections.

From the beginning of the conservation planning four years ago, water agencies have said they wanted their allotments restored.

The water agencies, along with city water districts, have invested about \$100 million in the effort.

Sagouspe said the California economy has suffered heavily in the recession and won't recover quickly if the multibillion-dollar agricultural industry does not get assurances of an improved, steady water supply.

He said he had no faith in the conservation plan: "If they're going to ignore the studies, this thing will fall apart."



** ADVANCE FOR SUNDAY APRIL 15, 2007 - FILE **
Homes in the "Pocket Area" of Sacramento, Calif., are seen behind the levee bordering the Sacramento River in this Feb. 22, 2006, file photo. This month, property owners in California's capital are taking part in an unusual mail-in vote to tax themselves for greater levee protection. (AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli) - AP - Rich Pedroncelli

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