

Economy, Political Leadership Shed New Light on Resource Priorities

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In recent months, I have begun to sense a shift in the public's attitude towards the environment and agriculture, and in particular, how average folks feel about how scarce water supplies should be used to meet competing demands.

We all want clean water, healthy forests and abundant fish and wildlife. But using questionable means to get there, and elevating fish and fur at the expense of family farmers and farm workers in these dire economic times is something that appears to be losing ground with the public and politicians. When you have elected officials willing to strongly and repeatedly stand up for those family farms, that trend can pick up momentum.

The events that are transpiring in the Central Valley this year provide an interesting case study on this matter.

Last month, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) released a new biological opinion that outlines changes the agency will require to the operation of state and federal water projects to protect salmon and other species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The NMFS opinion found that state and federal water pumping from California's Bay-Delta system is contributing to the possible extinction of salmon, sturgeon, steelhead, and – to the dismay of many – killer whales. As a result, Delta water exports will be reduced 330,000 acre feet. This is above and beyond water reductions that have already been mandated due to the Delta Smelt by another federal agency –the USFWS – in December 2008.

The opinion from NMFS triggered a firestorm of responses from elected officials, including Governor Schwarzenegger. U.S. Rep. Devin Nunes (CALIFORNIA) called the decision's conclusion that linked the death of killer whales to San Joaquin water users "outrageous", and with the support of Central Valley Democratic Congressmen Cardoza and Costa promptly introduced an amendment to the NMFS appropriations bill to over-rule the decision.

This action brought what is happening in the San Joaquin Valley to the floor of the House, and generated impassioned arguments for and against the amendment. Rep. Nunes told the House that 40,000 farm workers have already been laid off due to the shortages caused by the delta smelt decision. He said the situation has now been compounded by the NMFS action that "blames cities and farms in California" for the plight of the killer whale.

With lots of arms twisted that resulted in switched votes at the end, the final vote was 208-218 against the Nunes amendment, an exceptionally close vote on an ESA matter. Having this amendment considered by the House at all is a major achievement.

In recent weeks, Rep. Nunes has brought similar amendments to key House committees, where the amendments were narrowly defeated. Rep. Nunes has threatened to keep offering similar amendments wherever possible.

The important matter here is that elected officials and the general public are becoming aware that the ESA – a well-intentioned law with a noble purpose- can inflict very real wounds to average, hard-working Americans when it is wielded by litigious activist groups and narrowly focused federal agency biologists.

Two weeks ago, thousands of farmers, farm workers and their supporters rallied in Fresno, calling on federal officials to ease environmental regulations. Another rally organized a few months earlier by the Latino Water Coalition drew 10,000 supporters and Gov. Schwarzenegger to San Luis Reservoir.

A protest organized last week by well-funded environmentalists in Sacramento in support of fish, on the other hand, attracted just 200 participants.

Elsewhere, a recent poll released by Colorado State University finds– throughout the West - that, when addressing long term water scarcity, average citizens prefer reservoir construction and reuse systems over other water acquisitions, and in particular, are not in favor of water transfers from agriculture.

Could it be - as George Will recently suggested in a column he wrote for the *Washington Post* – that "the green bubble" has burst, pricked by Americans' intensified reluctance to pursue greenness at a cost to economic growth?

Perhaps Will was right. Reengagement with reality is among the recession's benefits.