

Sad Times for Western Water Users

Dan Keppen
Family Farm Alliance
Klamath Falls, Oregon

June 13, 2008

The last two weeks have been grim ones in the Western water world.

On May 30, John Keys III, the former Commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation, lost his life when the plane he was piloting crashed in Canyonlands National Park in Utah. That same day, irrigators on the West side of the San Joaquin Valley learned that they would have to undertake a severe water rationing plan that will dry up some of the most productive farmland in the world and impact a multi-billion dollar local economy.

I had a lot of time in the past week to think about both of these sad developments. I drove from Klamath Falls to Boise to attend the memorial service of John Keys, a man I considered to be a close professional associate and personal friend. As commissioner of Reclamation, John visited the Klamath Basin several times during the very nasty years following the Klamath Project irrigation curtailment in 2001. I worked very closely with John when I was working for the Klamath Water Users Association and later, through the Family Farm Alliance, when Reclamation rolled out its new reorganization and business plan.

John had a very impressive career in the water world. He began work for Reclamation in 1964, a career that eventually spanned 39 years. For 12 years, he was the Pacific Northwest Regional Director. He retired in 1998, and returned to Reclamation three years later, when he was appointed by President Bush as the National Commissioner in Washington, D.C. where he served from 2001 to 2006 when he again.

John was a kind and gentle man, beloved by his family and friends. He died on a beautiful day, in a beautiful place, doing something he loved to do.

Driving to and from John's service – held in a packed Cathedral of the Rockies – I thought about how fortunate I was to be able to work with him, even if only for a few years.

Winding through the high desert of Eastern Oregon, I also spent much time brooding about my friends who manage and farm in Westlands Water District, the area that is now bracing for a shock that will likely far exceed the devastation felt when Klamath Project irrigators lost their water in 2001.

Similar government regulations and court-ordered directives favoring fish over farmers will put the screws to San Joaquin communities this summer. Because farmland within Westlands accounts for 20% of the \$5 billion agricultural production of Fresno County -

the nation's number one farm county – the potential economic impacts could dwarf the 2001 Klamath crisis.

As a result of an extremely dry spring, and implementation of court-ordered water delivery restrictions on Central Valley Project (CVP) operations related primarily to protect fish, pumping out of the Bay-Delta has been drastically curtailed this summer. For the producers in Westlands, this means they will have a scant six inches of water to quench the thirst of permanent crops like almonds over a 3-month period.

Lawsuits launched by environmental activists have effectively throttled the ability to move water out of the Delta and into San Luis Reservoir. Groundwater resources on the west side of the valley are insufficient to make up for the lost CVP surface supplies. Water users are scrambling to enhance supplies by looking at alternative groundwater sources, putting together water transfers and exchanges, and pleading with government agencies for regulatory relief. As prospects for implementing these alternatives diminish, local water users have developed a rationing proposal intended to avoid a catastrophic total depletion of stored water in San Luis.

What is truly frustrating here – and what I kept reflecting on as I traveled across the Oregon Outback last week – is that the San Joaquin growers haven't exactly sat back and let this all happen to them. In the last 20 years, Westlands' farmers have modified their irrigation programs to maximize limited water supplies. The percentage of lands within the district irrigated by pressurized drip / trickle/ sprinkler and furrow/sprinkler combination means has doubled from 37% to 75% since 1985. Westlands' farmers continue to have one of the highest seasonal application efficiency ratings in the nation, with a 20-year average of 83 percent.

This looming crisis is tragic and unfair. These producers are some of the most innovative people I know. They have employed savvy and determination for many years – taking the high road all along – only to have their efforts denied by administrative, judicial and statutory restrictions beyond their control.

This time, it looks like they've run out of options.

Sad news to contemplate as I left John Keys' moving memorial service in Boise, headed back for Klamath Falls.