

Infrastructure Matters

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In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, and with refocused attention placed on the uncertain condition of the flood control infrastructure that protects Sacramento and other parts of California's Central Valley, the national consciousness has been awakened to the importance of basic infrastructure to the health and security of this county.

In the past year, I've had personal experience with two infrastructure issues that have underscored my belief that this country needs a wake-up call when it comes to taking care of those things that are most important to our existence. One was a visit to Montana's St. Mary Facilities of the Milk River, one year ago, which I will detail further below. The other has been my involvement with pushing for a local school bond here in Klamath County.

This past summer and fall, I was involved with developing and advocating for a \$75 million bond measure intended to make local schools safer for students and teachers. A centerpiece of the bond package was funding for a new elementary school, to replace the one where my children attended. The current school – constructed in 1929- was closed last summer due to mold and asbestos dangers. Now, my fifth grade son goes to class in a modular unit several hundred yards away, and my ninth grade daughter has classes in a temporary room – one of five constructed in a crowded, noisy small gym – so that other elementary school children can share space with high school students.

Believe me – you don't want to have your kids in this situation.

Part of the reason for the dismal condition of our local schools has been the series of economic blows suffered by our timber and agricultural communities over the past two decades. This, coupled with uncertain and diminishing state education funding, has led to "deferred maintenance" decisions that are now catching up with us.

The bond proposal – offered up in the healthier current economy – is one step towards fixing the problem.

I've also in the past year witnessed a tougher aging infrastructure challenge – this one related to water- at the St. Mary Facilities in northern Montana. The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation's (Reclamation) St. Mary Facilities of the Milk River Project are in urgent need of rehabilitation. Most of the structures have exceeded their design life and are in need of major repairs or replacement. System capacity has diminished. Steel siphons are threatened by slope stability and leaks, and landslides and crumbling structures have reduced water supply reliability.

The St. Mary Facilities face catastrophic failure after operating for over 85 years. One year ago, I toured these aging facilities and was astounded by the amount of deterioration to the diversion's facilities. When I saw the crumbling concrete and exposed rebar sticking out of the aging drop structures in the St. Mary Canal near the North Fork of the Milk River, I thought I was looking at Roman ruins. The remote location of these structures will contribute to a higher price tag, come construction time.

The economy of the Hi-Line region of northern Montana has been built around the stable water supply provided by the St. Mary Facilities. Without the needed rehabilitation the aging system may soon suffer catastrophic failure. Loss of the St. Mary Facilities would have a disastrous economic impact on the Milk River Basin and the state of Montana.

The St. Mary dilemma is seen by many as the “poster child” example of an aging water project that must be modernized soon, with potentially catastrophic implications if the problems are not addressed. Like many other parts of the West, this single-purpose project puts the financial burden of repairs on the irrigators it serves, who simply do not have the resources to solely pay for such an expensive repair. The solutions developed at St. Mary may very well provide a successful template that can be used in other parts of the West.

It will take a well-coordinated and cooperative basin-wide effort to secure rehabilitation of the St. Mary Facilities, and ensure the economic viability of the Milk River Basin. The forum where this is already occurring is the St. Mary Rehabilitation Working Group, which includes representatives from government, tribes, irrigators and local communities. In addition to developing a comprehensive working plan to fix St. Mary, this group is also working the political end, looking for ways to get the federal government to take into account the other sectors that benefit from the diversion, such as public flood control, recreation, wildlife and municipalities.

It is imperative that we find creative ways to provide for the operation, maintenance, and modernization of existing water supply infrastructure. Many Reclamation facilities are approaching the end of or are past the design life of the facilities. In addition, many of these facilities also need to be replaced with modern designs that provide for greater water management efficiency.

Sound business practices dictate that this existing infrastructure, and the water supply provided by these facilities, be protected and preserved. We must do all we can to educate the public and advocate to policy makers about the importance of addressing the West's decaying water storage and delivery infrastructure, using St. Mary as “Exhibit A”.

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