

OPINION:

MIKE VILLINES: Water supply, flood control plans lacking Fresno Bee – 12/27/05

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California is a geographically diverse state with more than 200,000 miles of rivers and streams, 1.6 million acres of lakes and reservoirs, 645,000 acres of estuaries, harbors and bays and 275,000 acres of wetlands.

According to the Department of Water Resources, average annual statewide precipitation is about 23 inches, equaling 200 million acre-feet of water. One acre-foot is enough to supply two families for a year.

The population in California is estimated to reach more than 47 million people by 2020, putting tremendous pressure on the state's water supplies. To put California's population into perspective, about one of every eight U.S. residents now lives in California. The estimated population growth is equivalent to adding the present populations of Arizona, Nevada, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, New Mexico and Utah to California.

Most of California's major water projects were built between 1940 and 1970. Despite increasing water demands for population growth and diversions for environmental purposes, few new sources of surface water storage have been added in the past 30 years and none are on the horizon. Why is that?

Part of strategy

The issue of new water storage and conveyance facilities is one fraught with emotional issues that seldom allows for clear discussion of the need to improve such facilities.

Because of environmental extremism, the subject of water storage and conveyance has been divided into an array of side arguments that are evaluated on the basis of environmental impacts, but not on the actual need for more water storage and better water conveyance. This is a mistake. The ability to capture and contain excessive river flows, snow-melt runoff and high rainfall surges should be an integral part of California's strategy for improved flood control and increased water storage.

In the aftermath of hurricanes Katrina and Rita, a significant amount of attention is being focused on flood control and the structural integrity of our state's levee system. Events involving the levees surrounding New Orleans have caused Californians to think differently about levees winding their way through the heart of our state.

The Department of Water Resources has outlined a levee maintenance proposal costing \$2 billion. In that proposal it is noted that the cost to repair levees has increased from \$300 per linear foot in the early 1980s to more than \$5,000 per linear foot today.

To understand the full impact of the costs of maintenance and project delays, one need look no further than the environmental extremists who argue for "protection" of the environment, but whose own policies do it harm, forcing project cost increases and significant delays, which under current levee conditions is a delay that is extraordinarily risky.

As an example, "vegetation mitigation," played a disastrous role in the six-year delay of a levee repair project on the Feather River. In that project, it was found that 43 elderberry bushes were growing along the levee that needed to be mitigated under the Endangered Species Act.

Makes no sense

To comply, 76 acres of a nearby peach grove were purchased to plant replacement elderberry bushes. The total cost of just the mitigation project came to \$1.9 million or about \$44,000 per elderberry bush. After completing the mitigation, the actual levee repair project was slated to begin.

Before it could start, the levee broke, killing three people, flooding 25 square miles and nearly destroying the entire mitigation project. Overall, the project cost more than \$10 million because of environmental mitigation for a proposed floodwall repair estimated at \$3 million to \$4 million.

It is common practice to lift regulatory burdens on repairs and maintenance after a disaster. However, streamlining those same regulations before one occurs has been extraordinarily difficult because of environmental extremism run amuck. This must stop.

The protection of lives and property are the primary purpose of the levees. There should be no compromise for that protection. The effective maintenance of levees has to be unburdened from environmental over regulation. The levees are not native habitat; they are man-made and allowing them to serve as habitat ahead of their public safety role jeopardizes their structural integrity.

Making the Delta levees safer will cost billions. Sound decisions rarely come out of a panic atmosphere. If reasonable minds prevail, the levees can be repaired without sending California into bankruptcy and without raising taxes. #