



Editorial: Water Storage Need Rises Above the Fuss

April 5, 2011

The state's three-year drought is over, thanks to a wet winter that dumped far more than normal snow in the Sierra. Reservoir operators have been releasing water just to make sure they have room when all that snow melts.

Meanwhile, our dry state is losing lots of precious water that could be stored for future use — if we had additional storage capacity in reservoirs above and below ground.

California hasn't added any major new above-ground reservoirs for decades. New Melones is one of the most recent, and it was completed 32 years ago.

The Merced Irrigation District is pursuing a plan that will increase storage at its Lake McClure by 70,000 acre-feet a year in wet years like this. As part of the relicensing process, the Merced district will ask the Federal Energy Regulation Commission for permission to increase the height of existing New Exchequer spillway gates and raise the elevation of the un-gated spillway by 10 feet.

The \$40 million cost will be paid by the irrigation district and its customers, not by the state or federal government. That's a big selling point in the bill introduced by Sen. Jeff Denham, R-Atwater. His H.R. 869 is co-sponsored by two other valley Republicans and two Democrats, including Dennis Cardoza of Merced.

But the bill already has drawn opposition. The legislation is needed because the higher water level would, in the years that it occurs, inundate less than a mile the 122-mile stretch of Merced River that is designated as wild and scenic. Friends of the River has gone on record opposing Denham's bill, and the board of the Tuolumne River Trust is joining the opposition for fear that there might be a similar attempt to encroach on the Tuolumne.

We're not aware of any such proposal affecting the Tuolumne, which flows into Don Pedro Reservoir. The Modesto and Turlock Irrigation districts are slightly behind the Merced district in the relicensing process for the Don Pedro power house.

Merced officials told editors at our sister paper, the Merced Sun-Star, that the extra 70,000 acre-feet would be captured about every three years, based on previous drought cycles. The extra water storage would last for two to eight weeks. Irrigation district officials argue that the enlarged reservoir would help to replenish groundwater downstream — through traditional irrigation practices and through the unpaved canals — and produce an extra 10,000 megawatts of electricity.

The Exchequer project is not a solution for the larger water shortage issues facing west side and southern San Joaquin Valley farmers. But it is an incremental step toward

more storage. Denham's bill would appear to have an easy go in the GOP-controlled House of Representatives. Its outlook in the Senate is not so clear.

The environmental groups suggest that if federal government allows McClure more storage in very wet years it will set a precedent threatening all wild and scenic rivers. We think that's an exaggeration. We fully expect there will be give-and-take in the relicensing process so both goals can be achieved — protecting the river's wild and scenic status and allowing a slightly higher lake level to store more water in wet years.

<http://www.modbee.com/2011/04/05/1629702/water-storage-need-rises-above.html>

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Annotations:

The editorial confused power with energy. The existing powerhouse is a 94.5 MW powerhouse, and Merced ID is not proposing to change the powerhouse. Thus the contemplated dam raise could not “produce another 10,000 megawatts of electricity.” Rather, Merced ID claims it would increase, presumably average, annual energy production by 10,000 megawatt hours.

HR 869 allowed for 60 days of reservoir inundation per year of the Merced National Wild & Scenic River. HR 2578, the measure also sponsored by Rep. Denham, reported out of committee, and passed by the House of Representatives, instead de-designates this portion of the Merced National Wild & Scenic River, aiming to eliminate any wild and scenic river to protect.

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