

Editorial: Don't mess with wild and scenic Merced River

Published: Monday, Jun. 27, 2011 - 12:00 am | Page 9A
EDITORIALS | Views of the editorial board

The nation's rivers were being so degraded by the 1960s that Congress took the step of establishing the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act to save at least some of the more pristine river sections.

California has benefited tremendously from that law. Of the state's 20,000 miles of river, some 1,900 miles in 23 rivers and creeks that retain their primitive character have been added to the National Wild and Scenic River System.

From the American to the Feather to the Trinity to Tuolumne to the Merced rivers, Congress made a commitment to preserve the free-flowing character and unique qualities of some sections of river for the benefit of present and future generations.

So it comes as a shock that hard-won compromises that created wild and scenic status for 122.5 miles of the Merced River – stretching from the headwaters in Yosemite National Park to the Lake McClure Reservoir behind the New Exchequer Dam – now are being challenged.

The Merced Irrigation District has gone to Congress to undo the commitment it made when it supported the wild and scenic legislation signed by two presidents, Ronald Reagan in 1987 and George H.W. Bush in 1992.

The district seeks to change the boundaries set between the wild and scenic section of the Merced River and the reservoir. And Central Valley lawmakers are going along with it.

Rep. Jeff Denham, R-Atwater, has introduced a bill (House Resolution 869) that would amend the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act to increase the allowed level of Lake McClure.

As the Friends of the River organization testified last week, "This bill, if passed, would be the first time in history that Congress had reversed course to allow a reservoir to flood a stretch of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System."

For what? Lake McClure currently has a capacity of 1.02 million acre-feet. The district, in going for a federal relicensing of the New Exchequer Dam, which expires in 2014, wants to expand its spillway to add 10,000 to 70,000 acre-feet – which would inundate part of the wild and scenic portion of the river.

That's hardly worth it given the terrible precedent it would set. The claim that this reservoir expansion would "improve the precarious water supply situation" in the San Joaquin Valley simply is nonsense.

The 1992 law is clear that the dam can only be relicensed at the current reservoir boundaries. That's why the district is going to Congress.

The Merced Irrigation District, which has not had water shortages, should seek relicensing of New Exchequer Dam under the boundaries set in that 1992 law – and leave the wild and scenic sections of the Merced River alone.

© Copyright The Sacramento Bee. All rights reserved.

http://www.sacbee.com/2011/06/27/3728965/dont-mess-with-wild-and-scenic.html#disqus_thread

F.O.R. Annotation: The proposed reservoir expansion would add 70,000 acre feet of new storage to the reservoir. The amount of water that could be gained by the new storage for consumptive uses downstream depends on assumptions (and mother nature), but the using standard storage to yield ratios, it could average around 10,000 acre feet per year. Diversions associated with the District's dams are around 500,000 acre feet per year.