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CENTRAL VALLEY, ENVIRONMENT

## Opinion: Will the Senate Sacrifice American Wild and Scenic Rivers for a Drop of Water?

POSTED BY DEANNA LYNN WULFF · JUNE 26, 2012 · 7 COMMENTS

**FILED UNDER** BILL H.R. 2578, DAMS, DEANNA WULFF, HALF DOME, JEFF DENHAM, MERCED IRRIGATION DISTRICT, MERCED RIVER, WATER EFFICIENCY, WILD AND SCENIC RIVERS, YOSEMITE VALLEY

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California has hundreds of irrigation districts and more than 1400 dams, which divide, divert and route water all over the state, but one district in particular is garnering national attention.

The Merced Irrigation District (MID) is in a relatively small town of 80,000 people, but it manages the famous Merced River, which runs through Yosemite Valley and is formed from its world-renowned waterfalls. The river has long been protected by federal Wild and Scenic status, which means it can't be encroached on by a dam, as Yosemite's Tuolumne River was long ago. But that status is now threatened due to bill H.R. 2578, a measure that among other things would amend the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act to make way for a spillway project. The project would flood 1700 linear feet of the wild river, a small section, but in doing so could rollback protections on all Wild and Scenic Rivers.



The Merced Irrigation District Office

**This could set a dangerous precedent. First, it might be 1700 feet, then it might be 17 miles, and then Yosemite's El Capitan and Half Dome might be accessible only by power boat. And there is the vulnerability of the rest of America's rivers to consider.**

And the project doesn't make sense.

MID's New Exchequer Dam has a capacity of a million acre-feet, which is more than the annual average flow of the Merced River. The project would add 70,000 acre-feet of storage, but in critical dry years, it would yield only 15,000 acre-feet. By California standards, that's not enough water for one-thousandth of one percent of the state's population. And it's expensive. The stated capital cost is \$40 million, not including operation and maintenance costs, or debt servicing, which can double the price.

So why make such a costly proposal?

**The bill's primary sponsor, Rep. Jeff Denham, R-Turlock, has publicly stated in a McClatchy News Service story, "It's a small step. We need thousands of jobs in the Central Valley, and we need many more projects like this."**

The claim is that more water storage will bring jobs, help farmers and provide reliable supply. But California's 1400 dams have rarely fulfilled that promise. Instead, in the last 20 years, Merced County's unemployment was, at its best, 10 percent, and, at its worst, 20 percent. Today, the rate hovers around 10 percent.

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Merced City Limit Sign. The town identifies itself with Yosemite.

percent, and it's not for lack of water. In the drought years of 2007, 2008 and 2009, California agriculture generated the highest revenues on record, and agricultural work increased by 2 percent, while construction work decreased by 44 percent and trade work by 46 percent. Drops in employment were related to the recession and the housing crisis, not the drought.

### There is little correlation between increased water supplies and a better living for most Central Valley residents, as poverty rates remain high in both wet and dry years.

That's a valid concern, but it overlooks the major problems caused by surface water storage. It's well documented that dams are destructive to the natural environment. The Central Valley once had natural wetlands, rivers and seasonal lakes. The Merced River was part of an ecosystem that connected the Sierra Nevada to the sea and brought life to the valley, in all forms, for all species. In the last century, 95 percent of Central Valley wetlands have been lost. Once plentiful salmon are heading towards extinction, and the area is now home to 91 threatened and endangered species. And dams and diversions are a major contributor to the deterioration of California's Bay-Delta ecosystem, where more than 750 species live. Thirty-three delta species are endangered, and likely to go extinct within the next 25 to 50 years, if not sooner. Scientists have clearly established the need to increase in-stream flows to resuscitate the system.

And how is California going to do that? It will have to reduce use, and the cheapest, most cost effective way to do that is via conservation, improved efficiency and better water management.

So again, why is MID advocating another dam project? The simplest answer is to manage more water to serve its customers. "My goal is to store water in a wet year and use it in a dry year," said MID General Manager John Sweigard. One of his primary concerns is replenishing the underground aquifer, which is being depleted.



The San Joaquin River is totally dry in parts due to diversions.

### An enormous amount of water is lost in its delivery. Many water districts lose about 40 percent of their water just sending it down leaking canals or decaying irrigation ditches.



A canal crossing the Central Valley

According to MID's annual report, in 2010, MID delivered 277,789 acre feet of irrigation water to approximately 1,900 fields farmed by 1,400 customers. An operational loss of 40 percent is about 100,000 acre-feet—which is significantly more water than can be provided by new surface water storage.

### That said, much of that water goes into replenishing the aquifer, which is used by farmers in dry and wet years. But the aquifer continues to get depleted despite MID's recharge efforts, which sets up a never ending cycle of overuse, followed by increased surface water demand.



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Meanwhile, MID is not compensated financially for replenishing its aquifer, which forces it to sell water out of district to compensate for losses. This March, MID voted to transfer 15,000 acre-feet of water to the San Luis Water District (SLWD) at \$176 per acre-foot. Notably, that's the average amount of water that will become available from the dam spillway project in critical dry years. The in-district cost of water is \$18.25 per acre-foot.

Water management problems can be solved, but not with the build-now, plan-later approach. Charging for ground water use would be a start. And there are many more ways to become efficient, as demonstrated by existing technologies already in use. But instead, the issue has escalated to the political realm and is tied to a bill passed by the House, where fair dialogue and subtle detail gets drowned out by loud rhetoric. The devil isn't in the details. It's in ideology of winners and losers, and we're all going to lose if we continue down that route.

MID is asking Congress and the people of the United States to rollback protections on all Wild and Scenic Rivers, by allowing a spillway project to encroach on the Merced River for a relatively small amount of water. This direction has never led to enough supply, only more consumption and demand.



The Merced River in June 2011: A high water year.

**Since the creation of the act in 1968, no protections have been removed from any of these rivers, and less than one-quarter of one percent of America's rivers are protected under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, while more than 75,000 large dams have encroached on 600,000 miles of American rivers.**

"The designation is a promise to the American people. We will protect this river from new dams and diversions, not just today, but for generations to come," said Katherine Evatt, a 23-year-river-activist working to protect the Mokelumne River, north of Yosemite. "The most recent Mokelumne dam proposal was the sixth in the last 30 years," she said. "We have to constantly fight them off, when we'd rather concentrate on restoring the river and getting the salmon and steelhead back. We need a way to secure permanent protection, and the wild and scenic designation is the only way."

There are many ways to solve our water management problems, but encroaching on America's last wild rivers isn't one of them.

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**About Deanna Lynn Wulff**

Deanna is a writer, editor, reporter and, occasionally, a river guide and national park service ranger. She is the author of the forthcoming, "The Girl's Guide to Getting Lost: Hard Hikes for Wild Women." Learn more at <http://www.deannalynnwulff.com>.

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**DISCUSSION**

**7 Responses to "Opinion: Will the Senate Sacrifice American Wild and Scenic Rivers for a Drop of Water?"**

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Mr. Wade – Thank you for comments, again. I can assure you that I take a great deal of pride in checking every fact. In every story, I've demonstrated willingness to go out of my way to be fair. The actual amount of operational losses is a bit higher than 100,000 acre-feet, and yes, some of that's going into the aquifer, which I made very clear. That's not the issue here. I've done the work. What's happened is that in the march to get more surface storage, other viable solutions are being missed. For me to write a



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detailed analysis on that, I must first outline the problem, which means I need more cooperation and specific information. I had that in my last piece on Selenium and Salinity. I can assure that I am much more interested in solutions, than I am in winning an argument. From the bits of data that I've been able to glean here, it seems that the aquifer is being depleted, which is a serious problem, and that MID is trying its best to serve its customers by replenishing that aquifer. But there is no compensation for that. Is that a good long term policy? Has that worked elsewhere? Could we store water better underground, where evaporation is less of a problem? There are many ways to look at this, which invite resolution for all parties. That's an article I'd like to write next, but to do that requires a lot of cooperation and trust. And much more time.

POSTED BY [DEANNA LYNN WULFF](#) | JUNE 27, 2012, 12:32 PM

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The above commentary is a reflection of the personal nonobjective viewpoints of the writer, which has been demonstrated in article after article. The claim that HR 2578 could impact all Wild and Scenic Rivers is a complete falsehood. It is highly doubtful that such a proposal would have been approved in Congress, which is why the legislation was narrowly written to only affect New Exchequer Dam on the Merced River. This proposal also reverses an unintended encroachment of the Wild and Scenic Rivers designation on the Merced River into already-defined Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) MID boundary upstream of Lake McClure.



Factless statements such as "Many water districts lose about 40 percent of their water just sending it down leaking canals or decaying irrigation ditches" is an affront to the efficiency levels already achieved by districts and their committed staff. Such an accusation of 40 percent losses without attribution would never pass a high school journalism class.

To further infer that Merced Irrigation District experiences 100,000 acre-feet in water losses is fantasy. MID delivers surface water to its customers and in doing so helps replenish the eastern Merced County aquifer with passive recharge through unlined canals. Farmers and the cities of Livingston, Atwater and Merced use water from the aquifer to grow food and to meet the domestic water needs of people in each of their jurisdictions.

This article serves no purpose other than to spread falsehoods and innuendos in an attempt to stall a sensible project that has bipartisan support in Congress and throughout the region.

Mike Wade  
California Farm Water Coalition

POSTED BY [CA FARM WATER \(@FARMWATER\)](#) | JUNE 27, 2012, 10:58 AM

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Mr. Smith-  
Thank you for your comments. I do appreciate your thoughts. First, off, most of my pieces are straight analysis; I look at the facts and outline potential solutions that might be suitable for both the environment and agriculture. These pieces take a tremendous amount of time and research, usually 2 months of effort. It is important to me, philosophically, to build community with my writing, because we're going to need a lot of that to solve our problems here in California.



But in this case, I had contacted the Merced Irrigation District May 9, and several times before then, with very specific questions about water management, which went unanswered. Seven weeks passed. There were more emails, more phone calls, two office visits and still no answers. Lots of talk. No data. Meanwhile, we have a bill marching through Congress that could detrimentally affect American wilderness and rivers, which are as much a part of our western heritage as farming. Not until the eleventh hour, on late Monday afternoon June 25, before I'm about to put this story together, do I get a call from the General Manager. At that point, the opportunity for sharing information and communicating is nearly lost.

Given the situation, I wrote this piece as fairly as I could. It is my opinion that we should not continue to treat the land and water as some kind of resource to exploit only to maximize the short-term profits of the few to the loss of everyone else, including other farmers, future generations and other species. This has never led to success, only more consumption, which doesn't lead to health and happiness. A greater sense of community does. So we might start by asking a different question: Not what can I get? But what can I give? This project will provide a tiny amount of water for a select set of people, at a very high cost, to the environment and the nation. Meanwhile, there are other ways to move ahead.

Unfortunately, we're now in the realm of politics, where rhetoric and arguing often replace resolution building. But ultimately, it is the people with their feet on the ground that will make the change. I hope to be one of them.

POSTED BY [DEANNA LYNN WULFF](#) | JUNE 27, 2012, 10:39 AM

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"A tiny amount of water for a select set of people" ? Really. We all have to have food to eat. Shouldn't you be including all



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of the consumers, as well as all of the citizens of Merced in your select set of people? Unless you are going to put up a fence to keep people out of California, we need all of the water storage we can get for our future generations. It not exploitation to maximize short-term profits.

POSTED BY **D. MAHNKE** | JUNE 27, 2012, 11:09 AM

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This article couldn't be more incorrect. First, the wild & scenic section on the Merced is already encroached upon during wet years, so the claims of destroying the river are red herrings since the impact already occurs. Second, water does equal jobs. Any claim it doesn't is simply being ignorant of the Valley's economics. Third, MID already does conservation and water management plans – these are required by state law. Also, groundwater recharge is a good thing and by having more above ground storage, the reliance on groundwater is reduced. Fourth, healthy salmon runs already occur on the Merced river, so any attempt to the San Joaquin river runs or other fish runs in the delta are poppycock. Lastly, I always love to hear environmentalists claim these designations “are forever,” but in reality they're just as arbitrary as any other law. To claim to have the best answer decades ago and therefore you can never change, the is the “knuckle-dragger mentality” these same green's claim conservatives have when it comes to the climate change, renewable energy, etc...



If you want to be concerned about species protection, flora and fauna, etc... Then I look forward to your critical comments about the massive destruction of the LA basin and SF Bay Area habitats that were decimated decades ago and your fervent attempt to see them replaced asap, at any cost, and without regard to such silly things as growth, jobs, and the destruction of livelihoods. Or does that hit at your liberal pocketbook too much?

The Senate should enact this law right away and allow progress to occur, for the good of the community, economy, groundwater recharge and general acceptance that opinions and beliefs change for the good of all.

POSTED BY **JOE SMITH** | JUNE 27, 2012, 7:08 AM

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