



Editorial: Making dam higher should be studied

Wednesday, Mar. 06, 2013

This week's storm is doing little to change the big water picture, which is dismal. Once again, there's too little snow in the Sierra and that translates to not enough water for urban and farm uses.

Dry years such as this one make it all the more important that California creates more water storage. That's why we have no reservation in continuing to support the Merced Irrigation District's proposal to study expanding storage capacity at Lake McClure. The district wants to raise the height of existing New Exchequer spillway gates and raise the elevation of the ungated spillway by 10 feet. That would allow the district to save an additional 70,000 acre-feet during the wet years.



Merced Sun-Star - SUN-STAR PHOTO BY MARCI STENBERG
MID wants to raise the Lake McClure spillway facilities by 10 feet with its new Exchequer Spillway Modification Project. It would not be raising the New Exchequer Dam, just the spillway, and the legislation would allow for some occasional short-term increases in the level of Lake McClure not to exceed elevation 877 feet.

The district needs congressional approval because the higher water level would, in the years that it occurs, inundate a small segment of the 122-mile stretch of the Merced River that is designated as wild and scenic. The district indicates that about 1,800 feet, less than half a mile, would be affected.

A bill that would have allowed this was introduced in 2011 by Rep. Jeff Denham and passed the House of Representatives in 2012. But the bill was never approved by the Senate, so the irrigation district has to start over.

This year's legislation is being carried by Rep. Jim Costa, D-Fresno, who now represents Merced County, and Rep. Tom McClintock, R-Elk Grove, whose vast district includes Mariposa County, in which the reservoir is located. District leaders hope that having bipartisan sponsorship will help get House Resolution 934 approved.

But environmental groups are opposing the higher spillway because they don't want any disruption to the river's wild and scenic status. They argue that any modification on the Merced will open the door to major changes to Wild and Scenic Rivers protections across the country.

That's hyperbole or, at best, premature speculation. Passage of this bill would not automatically result in raising the reservoir. Rather, it would allow the irrigation district to study this proposal as part of the process of relicensing its hydropower facilities at New Exchequer Dam. A thorough environmental review would be required before the

project could proceed and inevitably the district would have to provide mitigation measures to offset disruption to recreation or wildlife.

In the big scope of California's water needs, this is a relatively small project. It would benefit — and the \$40 million cost be borne by — the property owners and customers of the Merced Irrigation District. Potentially, it could boost power production at Exchequer by as much as 10,000 megawatt-hours, enough to serve about 1,700 homes.

It's almost impossible to build dams and reservoirs in California because of the regulations, the environmental challenges and the costs. It makes more sense to look at ways to make the best use of some of the existing facilities.

The Merced Irrigation District should have a chance to study expansion of Lake McClure to take advantage of the wet years, when we have them. We urge Congress to approve HR 934.

<http://www.modbee.com/2013/03/06/2608945/making-dam-higher-should-be-studied.html>

Annotations:

The editorial suffers from a number of factual or contextual problems: (1) although 70,000 acre feet of additional storage space would be created if the dam spillways could be raised, the average yield—the more significant number because of the extensive groundwater resources underlying the District—would be around 12,500 acre feet per year, or about 2.5% of the average amount of water diverted into the District diversion facilities, (2) The District is not prevented by the National Scenic Rivers Act from studying the dam raise. Once studied, among the things that the Merced Irrigation District and State officials would discover is that the proposal could not pass muster with dam-safety authorities, that costs will be much higher than District estimates—in part because they will need to raise the Highway 49 bridge—and that they cannot legally expand the reservoir because it would “take” State fully protected and threatened Merced River Canyon Limestone Salamanders, a species found nowhere else on earth, and (3) that the bill’s sponsors don’t appear to have the slightest intention of not doing this elsewhere. Rep. Denham told the House of Representatives that “we need many more projects like this,” and Rep. McClintock characterizes the National Wild & Scenic River System as “truly outrageous bureaucratic red tape.” The editorial also confuses HR 934, with a similar bill, HR 869, a Rep. Denham bill that was never taken up by the full House, which limited the duration of use of the potentially created new storage. HR 934 has no such limit. The editorial also fails to understand that the dam-raise proposal is too late to be included in the existing New Exchequer Dam relicensing process, which is just wrapping up its study phase for a license issuance (if on time) in 2014.

FOR, March 8, 2013