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San Joaquin Valley's water solution? Look north to the mighty Columbia River

By Phil Fullerton

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The mighty Columbia River separates Washington from Oregon in the Pacific Northwest.

Central Valley agriculture faces a looming existential water crisis from the interlocking problems of drought, climate change, and falling underground water tables. Yet the potential answer to this problem is incredibly simple and only a lack of political will may defeat it. The solution is to send south to California the abundant waters of the Columbia River.

New ground water rules to take effect in the coming decades are forecast to force the abandoning of thousands of acres of prime farm land. Potential drought and global warming mean less snow and more early, wasteful runoff. These spell doom for many farms.

This problem is not only important for us economically in the Central Valley, but for the United States and the world. Our Valley is the most productive food producing area in the United States and some would say the world. As the global population increases, the Malthusian risk of population growth exceeding food supply is always there.

This crisis potentially can be solved by a reference to fiction writer Edgar Allen Poe. In his short story, the "Gold Bug," Poe notes that the best way to hide something is to make it huge and obvious, like lettering on a map.

So it is with the water crisis! The answer is right in front of us: the giant Columbia River flowing between Washington and Oregon.

The Columbia has over 10 times the flow of the Colorado River, which serves 30 million people. That means the vast Columbia could serve 300 million people or almost the total population of the United States. A priori, one could postulate bringing its water to Lake Shasta, either over land or through the Pacific Ocean, and then following existing infrastructure south.

Politicians have seen this possibility of sending the water from the Columbia south, and with parochial limited vision have succeeded in blocking any research of it. In the late 1960s Henry “Scoop” Jackson, a U.S. senator from Washington state, sponsored and succeeded in having passed legislation barring any study of the feasibility of building a canal from the Columbia River in Oregon and Washington to parched California. This legislation effectively stopped any further study.

Cost is, of course, a question, but the lack of any studies of this project make any estimate impossible. Interestingly, China has been implementing a program to transfer water from the south Yangtze Basin to the parched north, a distance of over 1,000 miles.

It is not possible to directly transpose Chinese costs and experience to those of the U.S. But this shows the vitality of China, which has emerged as a major competitor to America on the world stage.

Unlike totalitarian China, political feasibility with a deadlocked Washington, D.C., is the looming problem with the Columbia project. The likelihood of bitter opposition is obvious, perhaps to the extent that it has not been considered at all.

Americans have historically shown altruism as with relief from Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy. But, sadly, altruism might not be the answer here. Instead, California as the world’s fifth leading economy (if a separate entity) could send money to those two states to substantially ease their financial burden.

In an article in The Oregonian published Aug. 10, 2010, Michael Milstein suggested that Oregon should use this resource to aid its beleaguered budget by sale of the water. And he also cautioned that if they didn’t move water to California, then folks would move from there to Oregon, a mortal threat to most Oregonians.

The issue is clearly: can the United States rise to a level of civic responsibility that transcends local politics? China, a Communist dictatorship, is moving to solve a similar problem, but doing so heedless of its human or environmental cost. Surely we can at least study this possibility! The future food supply of California, the nation and the world is at stake.



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Phil Fullerton Special to The Bee*

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