

Northern California

by Glen Martin
Environmental Reporter
San Francisco Chronicle
e-mail: martingl.@sfgate.com

Water politics in northern California have always been acrimonious, and that bitterness has only increased during the past decade.

In the early days of settlement, farmers and ranchers scrapped with each other over water rights. Then metropolitan water districts got into the act. With each new major water project—Shasta Dam, the series of reservoirs scattered along the western slope of the Sierra like a diadem of sapphires, the federal and state aqueducts that deliver water from the Sacramento River/San Joaquin River Delta to south state farms and cities—the stakes increased.

But the game became even more complex when environmentalists threw their hats into the ring, demanding greater fresh water flows down the Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers for anadromous fish such as salmon and steelhead.

Conservationists got some acres dealt to them with the passage of the 1992 Central Valley Project Improvement Act, which promised hundreds of thousands of acre feet of water each year to bolster fish runs.

But the act was never fully implemented, due to a series of lawsuits from agricultural interests and a certain amount of foot dragging from the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, which controls the disposition of much of the state's water. It seemed water policy was destined to remain gridlocked—as usual.

In late 1994, an ad hoc group of government agencies, municipal water districts, farmers and environmentalists met to see if the Gordian knot surrounding the CVPIA could somehow be cut. Ultimately known by the rubric of CAL FED, this organization is now the recipient of millions of state and federal dollars from policy makers who desperately hope it will reach some kind of consensus acceptable to all sides.

Without doubt, CAL FED has posted some impressive results. Thousands of acres of wetlands have been restored, hundreds of fish-killing pump intakes have been screened, and several small dams have been removed on critical salmon spawning tributaries.

But the big issue remains: Who gets the water? And how much? To date, CAL FED has been unable to divvy up the aqueous pie in a manner acceptable to all sides. The outfit remains concerned with the side dishes, not the entree.

To a certain extent, consensus efforts were undercut in 1999 by a federal appeal court ruling that directs the federal government to begin annual deliveries to the Sacramento/San Joaquin Delta of the 800,000 acre feet of water stipulated by the CVPIA. Predictably, environmentalists crowed and farmers squawked. More lawsuits may be expected.

In other words, a final policy for the allocation of the 23 million acre feet of water that annually flow off the west slope of the Sierra and the east slope of the Coast Range remains a chimera. A dream. A hope as evanescent as water itself.

