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# Yolo officials fear big water districts will buy up revenue-rich ag lands to aid smelt

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Published Thursday, Sep. 17, 2009

Over the years, Yolo County residents have taken pride in their restored wetlands.

The Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area, for example, lines Interstate 80 between Davis and West Sacramento, its reed beds filled with migrating waterfowl.

Now, however, Yolo officials see the restoration of other wetlands as a potential threat – and are taking steps to prevent it.

They're worried that powerful water districts from Southern California, which draw water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, will buy up tracts of Yolo open land and flood them to create habitat for the endangered Delta smelt.

Yolo County leaders fear the efforts could take farmland out of production and eliminate tax dollars, while the county is desperate for revenue.

This week, Yolo County supervisors held a workshop on a proposed ordinance that would give them authority over the conversion of farmland to wetlands.

"We have to have some protection," Supervisor Jim Provenza of Davis said at the meeting.

Anxiety in Yolo has increased as water districts eye the rural county as a prime spot for habitat restoration. The water districts are under pressure from the state and federal governments to provide aquatic habitat for the smelt or risk losing their water supplies.

"Yolo County's going to be fertile ground for these projects," Supervisor Mike McGowan said.

"We're ground zero. We're the bull's-eye."

The water districts care only about keeping "the plumbing moving down south," he said.

The county was caught off guard in December 2007 when the Westlands Water District – which irrigates more than 600,000 acres of farmland in the San Joaquin Valley – purchased a

3,400-acre ranch in the Yolo Bypass.

The bypass is a low-lying area used for flood protection, farming and habitat. Its southern portion is deemed prime for smelt because its elevation allows natural tides to sweep up the Sacramento River and inundate the land.

The smelt, tiny fish key to the Delta's food chain and ecosystem, are thought to be nearing extinction. They thrive in tidal wetlands.

Westlands spokeswoman Sarah Woolf said the water district has no plans to purchase any more land in Yolo.

"We don't have any intention to purchase additional acreage of any kind," she said.

"We want to see if this project works – to improve the health of the Delta and the species."

She said she wasn't familiar with the proposed ordinance but didn't think it was necessary.

"It's unfortunate, because I think everyone is trying to find a way to save the health of the Delta," she said.

Yolo leaders are also worried that the Metropolitan Water District, which supplies water to 18 million people in Los Angeles and San Diego, would try to buy up swaths of land.

District spokesman Bob Muir said he hadn't heard about the proposed Yolo ordinance but believed a collaborative approach is needed.

That was also the message of those who spoke against the ordinance at Tuesday's workshop, including representatives of Ducks Unlimited and the California Waterfowl Association.

Robin Kulakow is executive director of the Yolo Basin Foundation, a group that provides educational programs in the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area.

The area was established through public-private cooperation, she said.

She told the supervisors that the ordinance would be "a step backward" and encouraged them to work with various groups to come up with solutions.

"Now is not the time to make conservation efforts more complicated," she said.

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