

Grant lets locals test bypass flood impacts

By Jonathan Edwards

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Thanks to nearly \$300,000 in state money, locals will get a chance to study how flooding the Yolo Bypass more often would affect levees and the county's \$100 million rice industry.

Inundating the 59,000-acre spillway for months every year is part of the Bay Delta Conservation Plan. The project is a statewide effort by environmental groups, water sellers, and the state and federal governments to boost habitat for sensitive wildlife, thus allowing more water to head south to homes and farms in the Central Valley and Southern California.

Getting the grant "recognizes Yolo County has legitimate issues in implementing the state water plan," said Supervisor Jim Provenza of Davis. "It is important those issues be recognized."

Locals don't have anything against fish, but they say flooding the bypass for months each year, instead of an average of every three years, could jeopardize the region's flood protection, breed a heartier mosquito population and restrict rice farming.

Without giving farmers an opportunity to clear out the bypass, dense vegetation would grow unchecked, reducing the amount of water that could move through the basin by as much as half, said Petrea Marchand, the county's intergovernmental affairs manager.

It would be "like a forest," she said.

But locals don't have the proof to back up their hunches. They hope the \$290,000 grant gives them answers, and quickly, before players at the state level set the plan in stone.

"We don't know at this point, because we didn't have funding for studies," Marchand said. Now, "time is of the essence.

"We need to get going on this before it makes it into any permanent plans or proposals."

Local knowledge is "critical" for the conservation plan to succeed, she added. "Our stakeholders and our constituents know the land and know the water better than anyone involved in developing the (plan)."

Now that the county has the money, local leaders can put that knowledge to good use. The county can spend up to \$50,000 on reviewing the legitimacy of a flooding model developed by state and federal water sellers. The model aims to show which areas of the bypass flood depending on how much water is spilling in from the Sacramento River.

If the model proves trustworthy, researchers can use an additional \$65,000 to see how many acres of rice would get submerged as more and more water flowed through.

Locals haven't rejected the Bay Delta Conservation Plan's project outright, but have suggested smaller-scale flooding that wouldn't have as big an impact on levees or rice farming. The money will allow the county to investigate that alternative.

"There's other suggested alternatives that are out there," Marchand said.

Another option would require money for agricultural easements, a legal device used to permanently preserve farmland. The easements require money, however, money local governments don't have.

The Yolo Land Trust, a local nonprofit that specializes in brokering easement deals, has a backlog of 75 landowners who are interested in preserving 22,000 acres, said Michele Clark, executive director of the land trust. The land trust has secured 8,700 Yolo County acres in the two decades of its existence.

"There isn't enough money to pay for all those easements," Marchand said, but a future agreement could jump-start a wave of deals to keep farmland in agriculture forever.

The county's studies should bear fruit in a couple months, she added, a quick turnaround that's necessary.

"The (Bay Delta Conservation Plan) process is going so fast it forces us to speed our process up," Marchand said.

Delta counties were shut out of the discussion at the beginning, but Marchand said key players have welcomed the five delta counties table. Besides Yolo County, they are Sacramento, Solano, Contra Costa and San Joaquin counties.

The delta coalition met with the director of the state Department of Water Resources and the board of the Metropolitan Water Agency, a water supplier in the Central Valley.

"Those talks have gone well," Marchand said. "The discussion is much better than it's been in the past."

She's not holding her breath, however, and taking a fool-me-once attitude.

"We're really wary, because they weren't really working with locals," she said. "We're still at the very early stages, so I don't want to be overly optimistic."

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