

Report: Flooding as part of Bay Delta Conservation Plan could ruin Yolo Bypass rice crop

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Burying two 40-foot-wide tunnels beneath the Delta will make a mess, but state officials hope to offset the environmental damage by improving the ecosystem in other parts of the Central Valley.

And one of their main candidates for mitigation is the Yolo Bypass, where the Bay Delta Conservation Plan, or BDCP, proposes increased flooding to create additional fish habitat.

Yolo County leadership has been leery of this idea, and a new report explains why: a cost of up to \$9 million per year in lost revenue, and the possible irreversible loss of the entire rice crop in the Bypass.

According to the report, authored mainly by UC Davis researchers, "Increased frequency and duration of inundation within the Bypass for fish habitat may translate into financial losses for farmers and the regional economy."

Put more simply, it's the wrong time of year for flooding. "You need to dry the field out to plant the rice," said Supervisor Jim Provenza in an interview with The Democrat.

Natural flooding occurs there anyway - local flood protection is one of the main functions of the Bypass - but as flooding extends into late March, April and May, the crops there become negatively affected.

"We found that the late additional flooding prevents the planting of rice," Provenza said. And the later the flooding, the worse the effects.

Even more alarming, the report provides a "tipping point analysis," Provenza said, "meaning at what point that the growing of rice declines so much that it goes away completely."

The conclusion: "At some point, if enough of the rice leaves the Bypass, it all goes," he said.

The California Natural Resources Agency, which is overseeing the BDCP on the state level, says water users will fund the project, not the state or federal government. Reports have estimated the project will cost \$14 billion although the agency says that is not its figure.

However, Provenza said, "What they're paying for is the pipes. They're not paying for the impacts."

With the Woodland-Davis Surface Water Project under way, locals already are working on their own water source, Provenza said. They see no reason to help pay the way for water users in Southern California too.

Yet local residents will end up shouldering some of the burden, should Yolo County's revenues decline because of the BDCP's mitigation efforts. Rice is one of the most lucrative crops in Yolo County, second only to processing tomatoes.

"They're required to mitigate for the loss of species that are caused when they import water south," Provenza explained. "So they have to mitigate for that loss somewhere else, and they'd like to do some of that mitigation in the Yolo Bypass."

Most of the proposed mitigation is slated for Yolo and Solano counties.

In theory, the Board of Supervisors is fine with that, he said, unless the mitigation causes "catastrophic impact on our agriculture or on our economy."

Delayed planting caused by late flooding not only lowers yields, he said. The increased risk can disrupt crop insurance and loans for rice farmers. Eventually, the entire crop could collapse.

Still, the county does not reject the BDCP outright, and is happy to work with the state and federal governments to find solutions.

"We think it is possible to develop a project that is compatible with the farms and wetlands in the Yolo Bypass, but we are not there yet," said Supervisor Mike McGowan in a statement released Wednesday.

In general, said Supervisor Provenza, "We've endorsed studying alternatives. There are a couple different alternatives out there," such as one for a much smaller project put forth by Congressman John Garamendi, D-Walnut Grove.

The current project - twin tunnels cutting about 35 miles through the Bay Delta, siphoning as much as 9,000 cubic feet of water every second - "appears to be way more than they need," Provenza said. "And of course the bigger that project is, the more mitigation they have to do."

The problem, he said, has been getting state and federal officials to incorporate the county's concerns.

Although "We've had some favorable responses" from them, Provenza said, the concerns expressed in the recent report have been sent to those officials - in the form of draft reports - for a long time now, with no apparent results.

Every time a new iteration of the BDCP comes out, Provenza said, the Yolo County's concerns are not reflected in it.

"It's a little bit disconcerting to have this continue to go on, and not see something there," he said.

The supervisor hopes local residents understand that what happens to the Bypass "does impact us significantly." Unless the county's concerns are addressed in writing, "We're very much at risk."

"This project has in a way acted with tunnel vision toward the goal of building these tunnels," he said.

"In that quest to do things quickly they aren't necessarily doing it well."

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