

Increased bypass flooding may sink local agriculture, report says



By Brett Johnson

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A proposal to increase flooding in the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area, with seemingly harmless intentions of promoting fish habitat, has drawn opposition for its discovered implications for the local economy.

The opposition is based on foresight afforded by UC Davis researchers, and a recent study, “Agricultural and Economic Impacts of Yolo Bypass Fish Habitat Proposals.” The study identified potential for an adverse effect on the area’s rice industry, Yolo County’s second most lucrative crop.

The report found that flooding up to half of the 57,000 acres of the Yolo Bypass, as was proposed, would mean up to \$9 million per year in lost revenue if the flooding did not heed the importance of the agricultural calendar.

The Bay Delta Conservation Plan is proposing the increased flooding as an offset to the environmental impact that constructing twin water supply tunnels around the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta would have.

It’s a concept that neither Yolo County Supervisor Jim Provenza nor his peers take issue with, but it came into question after the recent study thoroughly examined various scenarios for its execution. The worst case is that \$9 million figure.

“What we’ve found is that some of those scenarios could result in a catastrophic effect on our agricultural industry,” Provenza said. “The problem is that we grow a lot of rice, and this crop does not do well with water in planting seasons.”

In its research of crop patterns, the study reiterated what many farmers already know — fields must be dry for planting rice. And if they're not, the crop is nearly impossible to grow, or otherwise too much of a risk for farmers to try to do so.

“If you don't stop the flooding by March, you're going to have increasingly greater impacts on our ability to grow rice,” Provenza said. “We think that you reach a tipping point in which there's no more rice at all in the bypass.”

But the report also outlined a positive — or at least, comparatively less detrimental — outlook if certain actions are performed. For example, if the additional flooding at the rate of 6,000 cubic feet per second is halted by mid-February, it would reduce the burden on the economy to \$241,000 every year.

That's still a large amount of money, Provenza said, but it's at least manageable. Confining flooding to the eastern portion of the bypass also would mitigate financial damage.

“You could also do additional flooding in years that are going to be flooded out,” he added. “Some years there's so much water that the farmers aren't able to plant crops anyway.”

It's not just the Yolo County rice industry that may be interfered with; an auxiliary repercussion might be the flood conveyance properties of the bypass.

“Of course, the rice is important, because of its economic value,” Provenza said, “but in addition to that, the fact that farmers plow the fields every year is important to flood control.

“In areas like the Sutter Bypass, where there's no active farming, you have a lot of plant growth, which reduces the flood holding capacity. The Yolo Bypass is primarily designed as protection against flooding.”

It's one of the areas that is to be tested as more funding is sought for additional studies, which will include further analysis of the impacts on local agriculture and animal habitats.

The initial study — on the potential blow to the agricultural industry — was reviewed by state officials, Provenza said, and the response was favorable.

Consequently, Yolo County's leaders are optimistic, but they still believe the public should be apprised of this project's indefinite status.

“We're concerned because the original proposals — the ones that may have a catastrophic effect on our county — are still on the table,” Provenza explained.

The next step for Yolo County's leaders is ensuring that one of those aforementioned alternatives is embraced by the state. To that end, Provenza said, a memorandum of

understanding has already been put forward that commits to pursue the benign options for implementation of the plan and provides compensation to Yolo County for any economic loss incurred in the process.

Provenza suggested there's a way to find a solution by compromise, but it's not going to be by means of haste or shortsightedness.

"I think it's doable," he explained. "It just takes the willingness to work with us and to work with our farmers."

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