

Fighting for the Yolo Bypass: Bay Delta Conservation Plan raises concerns

Some argue whether it is mitigation or conservation

By [DON FRANCES](#)

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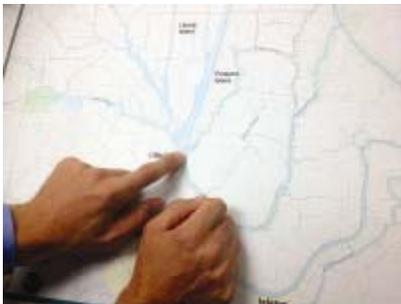
A pair of UC Davis researchers take water samples from a flooded field at Knaggs Ranch in the Yolo Bypass. (Deo Ferrer/Democrat file)

Somewhere near Rio Vista, at the southern tip of Liberty Island, salmon are making an unfortunate left turn.

The adult Chinook salmon, which are trying to swim upstream to spawn, should be taking the Sacramento River for most of their journey. Instead, some wind up in the Yolo Bypass, where they die without leaving behind offspring.

This concerns Karla Nemeth and her colleagues at the California Natural Resources Agency, the lead agency guiding the Bay Delta Conservation Plan, or BDCP - a gargantuan project which lists, among its "co-equal" goals, "the conservation and enhancement of aquatic and terrestrial species" in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.

The BDCP also aims to pipe freshwater from the Sacramento River southward.



Jason Roberts of the state Department of Fish and Wildlife points to where salmon are steering off course and into the Yolo Bypass. (Don Frances/Democrat)

However, "It's the conservation side of the plan that brings us to the Yolo Bypass," Nemeth said recently when several state planners working on the BDCP sat down for an interview with The Democrat.

In all, the conservation side of the plan seeks to protect 57 Delta species, 11 of them fish and the rest birds, plants or land animals. That puts the Yolo Bypass in planners' sights, as the endangered Chinook - along with green sturgeon and Sacramento splittail, both threatened species - are known to get stuck there.

As for the other side of the plan - providing a new reliable water source for farmers and residents in Southern California and parts of Santa Clara County - planners propose doing this by running two 40-foot-wide, 35-mile-long tunnels deep underground from the Sacramento River southward. Current estimates put costs at \$24.7 billion.

On May 31, several members of Congress gathered in Sacramento to decry the plan, which they characterize as a water grab. As Congressman John Garamendi, D-Fairfield, spoke of "miles upon miles destroyed so that somebody can steal that water and take it south," several Yolo County leaders stood behind him, including Supervisor Jim Provenza.

While much of the impact would be in other



A UCD researcher places salmon fry in a dish to be injected with an RFID tag before being released into the Yolo Bypass. (Deo Ferrer/Democrat file)
counties, Yolo County does stand to lose depending on how certain details of the plan play out. Local officials say they don't necessarily want a fight, but they've been clear in their desire to nail down the effects of the proposed plan on Yolo County's agricultural heritage and bottom line.

However the BDCP affects the rest of the state, it does have ramifications for Yolo County, and county leaders want to know what they are. "How do potential economic impacts on Delta agriculture - including within the Yolo Bypass - factor into the BDCP planning process?" Provenza asked in an email.

The problem is that BDCP planners currently have few specifics available, only general goals. Jason Roberts, a senior environmental scientist for the



A UC Davis researcher takes water samples from a flooded field at Knaggs Ranch in the Yolo Bypass. (Deo Ferrer/Democrat file)

California Department of Fish and Wildlife, listed the BDCP's current goals for the Bypass: providing adult fish passage through the Bypass and back into the Sacramento River, developing flood plain rearing habitat, improving fisheries management at Lisbon Weir (on the east side of the Bypass), and the realignment of Putah Creek.

Economic impacts

In April, Yolo County released a report titled "Agricultural and Economic Impacts of Yolo Bypass Fish Habitat Proposals." The report examined state plans for the Bypass - in particular, the BDCP proposal to increase flooding there to help meet its conservation goals.

That idea involves installing gates at the Fremont Weir - a long, berm-like barrier between the Sacramento River and the north side of the Bypass - "that would allow more fish to come into the Bypass," Nemeth explained. There, the fish could "eat, get fat, slow down, and move through the system more easily. ... So that's a primary goal of doing this flood plain restoration."

Though originally designed for flood control, the Bypass has become an important agricultural area, and revenue source, for Yolo County. And that makes flooding it a complicated proposition.

The county's report finds that too much flooding could compromise rice planting in the Bypass, resulting in a loss of revenue - anywhere from a few hundred thousand dollars to \$9 million per year.

In a worst-case scenario, the report says, a "tipping point" could be reached, causing Yolo County's entire rice crop to disappear for good. Provenza said he wonders how much these impacts factor into the state's plans, and whether affected communities will "potentially suffer some economic harm as a result."

Nemeth, who is project director of the plan, applauded the county's research. "We think that's a good and useful report and we're absolutely incorporating into our preliminary thoughts," she said.

Planners noted that Yolo County's reports are impressively "granular" - highly detailed and scientific, possibly owing to the help provided by UC Davis researchers.

But Nemeth said the state can't delve into too many specifics yet, because details on the BDCP are still being hashed out.

"All of that information (in the report) is actually going to help us to design something, because we haven't designed anything," she said.

Asked about the potential damage to Yolo County's rice crop, Nemeth said, "Our first goal is to avoid those kinds of impacts."

Katie Spanos, a Department of Water Resources employee working on outreach to Delta farmers, noted that the BDCP could even benefit farmers there.

"We can maybe help some of the farmers in the Yolo Bypass, by improving drainage" or in other ways, she said.

Spanos said it was too early to give many specifics on what those benefits might look like.

Saving fish

Still, local leaders can't shake the feeling that Yolo County is taking a hit so that other people can have fresh water.

They say the co-equal goals of conserving the Delta while draining its fresh water are at cross purposes. And they wonder if the conservation efforts in Yolo County aren't really just mitigation for environmental damage caused by the twin tunnels.

State planners object to that notion, saying they're trying to take an overall approach to fixing the Delta and connected waterways. They say water management takes many forms and, in this case, a solution will take many forms.

"The state of California manipulates water flows for a whole variety of reasons, not just water supply," Nemeth noted. "Flood control is a good example - that's why the Yolo Bypass looks the way it does right now."

The goal of planners is not to make the Delta or the Bypass "natural" again. As Nemeth put it, "We're not going to restore it back to pre-colonial (conditions). What we're trying to do is create a balance."

Less than 5 percent of the Bay Delta's 740,000 acres is original habitat today, state planners said.

By now the entire draft of the BDCP, and its environmental impact report, have been released by state officials. Provenza said earlier this month that county staff are reviewing it, and "noted several places where BDCP's report refers to mitigation in the Bypass or

that their conservation project in the Bypass will allow them to avoid mitigation elsewhere."

Noting the pun, he concluded: "Whether they call it a conservation project or mitigation, it still looks like a duck and walks like a duck."

Whatever it's called, Nemeth said that "BDCP, because it's a conservation plan that goes beyond mitigation, is providing for a variety of other species in the Bypass as well that are not mitigation requirements of the projects. Sacramento splittail is an example."

She said Conaway Ranch could serve as one model for how the plan's myriad goals are met in the Bypass. The property, once owned by the county but sold to private landowners, "combines farming and conservation easements for multiple species."

Ultimately, such a complex, many-sided effort is unlikely to please everyone, she said.

For the state's many stakeholders, Nemeth said, it's "not what they want, but what they can live with."