

Local leaders fret over bypass flooding plan

By Brett Johnson

From page A1 | December 18, 2013 | [Leave Comment](#)

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As state and federal officials gather input on the controversial Bay Delta Conservation Plan, Yolo County's leaders are answering loud and clear that they're worried the plan will harm Yolo's agricultural sector.

The plan is to install three water intakes on the Sacramento River that feed an underground tunnel system carrying water to pumps in the south Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. But the local problem emerges from a conservation measure that's been proposed to mitigate the environmental impact of the conveyance facilities.

One piece of that proposal, known as Conservation Measure 2, would target thousands of acres of rich farmland in the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area for increased flooding. The flooding intends to create a safe passage for fish, like salmon, that are attracted into the bypass.

However, in April a UC Davis study found that if the flooding were to extend into certain sensitive months for rice farmers, the county's second most valuable crop would fail to grow — causing up to \$9 million per year in lost revenue.

The report prompted local leaders like Yolo County Supervisor Jim Provenza to voice concerns about the ambiguous lack of guarantee that the well-intended flooding would respect the agricultural calendar.

Despite the opposition, in the public draft that was released on Dec. 9 there's no confirmation that Yolo's rice farming would not be jeopardized by allowing flooding to continue into April or May.

"This plan hasn't changed all that much," Provenza said. "There's maybe a nod to Yolo County in some statements in there — stressing the importance of agriculture — but nothing concrete.

"There's nothing that would require them to balance their habitat planning and tunnels against the needs of agriculture. What we do in Yolo County is we consider and balance the various interests in making plans."

Also, he further explained, with the way the plan is drafted now, the program will give the state's water agency control over a large swath of Yolo County land for the next 50 years.

The language of the proposal mandates adaptive management, which creates another issue: If the conservation benefits aren't meeting expectations set by the state, adaptive management allows extra measures to be taken. But the governing of this, Provenza insists, must adhere to county interests.

The local politician gave an example of the sort of thing that may happen with adaptive management sans any county voice on the governing committee:

"One thing they could do to meet federal requirements is to reduce water supply south, but the other thing they could do is to put the whole burden on our county, or delta counties, by taking more land out of farming," Provenza said.

He hopes the county's officials will be able to take some role in the project's adaptive management, especially when the county is already facing a \$9 million hit to agriculture if no heed to paid to Yolo's current concerns.

"We think it's possible to have a significant benefit for salmon and other habitat populations using the bypass without significantly harming agriculture," he said. "We want to help find that balance."

If Yolo County must endure an unavoidable economic blow, Provenza wants the county to be adequately compensated. Yolo's agricultural sector should not be shouldering the financial burden, he said.

Establishing an agreement for the county to recoup any economic loss is something he is hoping the state will commit to in a memorandum of understanding.

As far as getting federal officials to agree to suggestions such as these, the county supervisor is equal parts optimistic and wary.

"We've been meeting once a month with (California Secretary for Natural Resources) John Laird, and we've had good discussions," Provenza explained. "We've been hopeful that we'll make progress, and will continue to be.

"But up to this point, the concrete assurances that we need haven't been there. We need to know — fairly soon, too — that our interests are going to be protected. ... We don't have much more time."

The subsequent draft the state is producing is going to be the final proposal. June has been designated as the target for its completion. Implementation will come thereafter, with the exception of potential delays.

Support for the project from Provenza and his colleagues on the Yolo County Board of Supervisors hinges on whether their concerns are addressed in the forthcoming proposal.

If issues remain after the planning phase concludes, Provenza attested to the willingness of local leaders to explore other solutions:

"We'd have to examine our legal and political options at that point. We're not there yet, but we're very serious about ensuring that our county's interests are protected."