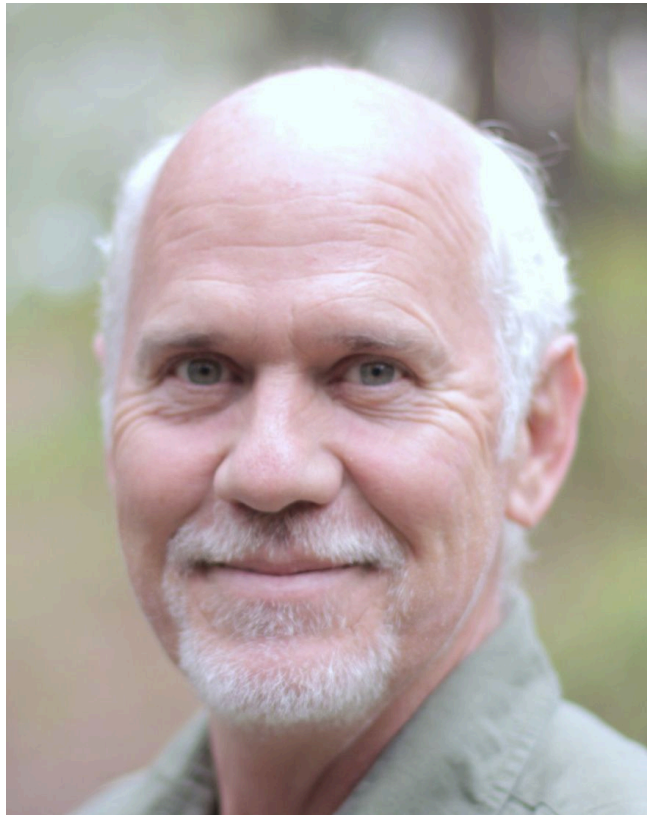

In My View: Where Does Our Water Go?

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On a recent trip to Los Angeles, I drove along the California Aqueduct, a huge canal flowing south. At the bottom of the San Joaquin Valley the water was sucked up by gigantic pipes for delivery over the mountains to southern California cities.

This made me curious to know, where does our water go and where does it come from? I found there are five major water projects that deliver water across California.

San Joaquin Valley

Driving up Highway 5, I paid attention to the agricultural areas that are kept alive by imported water. Millions of acres of nuts, fruits, vegetables, grass, grain, and cotton depend on water delivered south through the California Aqueduct. These farmers will fight for this water.

I saw a homemade billboard that one farmer put next to the highway that said, “Build More dams. STOP manmade droughts.” I think they are blaming “government” for the water shortage, but this is not fair. There is simply not enough water to go around.

Then it occurred to me that this could have been posted by a climate activist. “STOP manmade droughts!” There is enough scientific evidence to show that climate change is the direct result of human activities. Factually speaking, we are experiencing “manmade droughts” as the planet gets hotter.

Farmers Gamble

The large farms in the San Joaquin Valley gamble that the “government” will continue to provide unrestricted water. They have chosen to farm in a virtual desert based on past reliable water deliveries. But there is competition for this limited supply and future water deliveries may be reduced.

Historically there was a large lake in the San Joaquin Valley. According to an article in the San Francisco Chronicle (6/6/23), “Tulare Lake was the largest freshwater body west of the Mississippi. During wet years it stretched 800 square miles or more.” Imagine a lake two thirds the size of Del Norte County.

This lake started to dry up in the late 1800’s as water was diverted from the rivers that filled it. With the heavy snow and rain this winter, Tulare Lake has begun to fill again. Unfortunately, many residents and farms located in the old lakebed have been flooded.

Who Moves It?

The California Aqueduct is part of the State Water Project operated by the California Department of Water Resources. This project siphons water from the Sacramento River which causes a perpetual conflict between retaining water for a healthy ecosystem and pushing more water south.

There is a growing demand for a finite quantity of water. Salmon populations require a strong flow of cool fresh water. Vast rice farms rely on the river to flood their fields. In the north, this water irrigates hay fields and waters cattle.

The source of the water that serves all these uses before ultimately arriving in Los Angeles starts in the watershed north of Lake Shasta, more than 650 miles away.

The US Bureau of Reclamation manages the Central Valley Project (CVP), a complex, multi-purpose network of 20 dams and reservoirs, including Shasta Dam, hydroelectric powerplants, canals and other facilities extending 400 miles through central California. CVP conveys water in the Sacramento, San Joaquin, and Tulare basins.

The second largest CVP reservoir is Trinity Lake, impounded behind a dam near the Trinity River headwaters. From this reservoir, water is diverted east to the Sacramento River watershed. This project affects Del Norte directly. This is water that could have contributed to the healthy flow of the Klamath River.

Dam It!

Building more dams is an unrealistic solution. Dams are very expensive to develop, and a dam has no value if there is not enough water to fill the reservoir. California already has a lot of dams. The water storage and

conveyance system that California has assembled is an engineering marvel, but some of these projects could never be constructed now.

Putting a dam today in the Hetch Hetchy Valley would be impossible. The O'Shaughnessy Dam was completed in 1923, creating the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir. Since 1934 this has provided water to San Francisco. There were objections to sacrificing a wilderness area in Yosemite, but in the end, this dam was built. Hetch Hetchy now provides water to 2.7 million people who will fight to keep it.

It is a remarkable feat to move water from the Tuolumne River in the Sierras through the Hetch Hetchy Aqueduct hundreds of miles across the state to the coast.

What is more impressive is that we have the Smith River, the only major undammed free flowing river left in California. This water is ours to defend.

Just Take It

As Los Angeles grew, they looked north for more water and found Owens Valley. The City of Los Angeles then purchased property and water rights along the Owens River upstream from Owens Lake.

In 1913, the Los Angeles Aqueduct began delivering water from the Owens River to Los Angeles. This water conveyance system is owned and operated by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power. As a result of this water diversion, Owens Valley is no longer a viable farming community. This is a water right causing a water wrong.

Take More

Needing still more water, Los Angeles promoted the Colorado River Aqueduct which opened in 1939 and is operated by the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California. This project moves water from the Colorado River at Lake Havasu through a series of canals and tunnels straight west to Los Angeles County.

Competing Colorado River water rights are held by Colorado, Arizona, Nevada, California, and Mexico. There is not enough for everyone, and they will fight to get what they can. Fun fact: So much water is taken from the Colorado River that it no longer reaches the ocean.

Water Rights

All these water developments were mostly legal, based on asserted water rights. With dwindling supplies of water there is a need to review and renegotiate water rights. It looks like the State of California is about to do this. This is a complicated subject, which I will research and report on in a future column.

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