

Future of valley water discussed

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Water watchers gathered Friday in Chico for a lengthy talk about the future of water in the Northern Sacramento Valley and a rallying point to become more proactive in guiding water management in the future.

The Sacramento Valley Environmental Water Caucus assembled a group of speakers that drew about 40 local residents, most of them very active in following water issues.

Some of the underlying concerns are that as the state grows, other parts of the state will be looking to Northern California to meet the state's water needs -- including water transfers. Another key point is that the Lower Tuscan aquifer is a rich resource for use for water needs and should be guarded to ensure that it is not overtapped, speakers said.

The caucus is concerned that some in the Sacramento Valley will sell water to developers and agricultural corporations south of the delta without taking into account the people who live in the north valley.

Speakers included Jim Brobeck of the Butte Environmental Council; Lev Kavvas, UC Davis watershed modeling expert; Steve Evans of Friends of the River; Caleen Sisk-Francos of the Winnemem Wintue Tribe; and Mindy McIntyre of the Planning and Conservation League.

Attorney Michael Jackson of the caucus has been vocal about his concerns that the Lower Tuscan aquifer will be tapped before adequate study is done to understand how it operates. Studies have been done over recent years, but the dynamics of the underground supply of water have not been fully explored.

The caucus believes more study is needed before plans move ahead to access that water, which is estimated between 24 million and 30 million acre feet. That much water could not be accessed every year, but water managers believe there could be an annual "yield" to that aquifer that could be used locally and perhaps to provide for the overall state's water needs as the state continues to grow.

There is a movement regionally to learn how to "exercise" that aquifer, by withdrawing water and allowing groundwater recharge. The overall goal is to use the water in a way that does not deplete the groundwater resource, as has been done in other parts of the state when overpumping has occurred, although the caucus is cautious that the intention to tap into that aquifer is going too quickly.

Gary Mulcahy of the Winnemem Wintue Tribe spoke passionately about the need for people to become proactive about water issues. His tribe has been working to stop the proposed raising of Shasta Dam to protect salmon in the river.

"If you have in your mind that it can't happen here, you're not in the right mind," Mulcahy said.

He spoke of places such as India and Pakistan where large soda companies have bought up water rights, forcing residents to walk four to five miles each way to gather water.

"If you think it can't happen here -- think again," Mulcahy said.

"If you think the government is going to look out for your interests -- think again."

He spoke of citizen needing to gather into the "public tribe, the public trust," to fight against water exploitation.

Ten years ago people didn't think about water quality, he said. Nowadays, people regularly buy bottled water because they believe the water in their taps is not good. That's a new phenomenon that is growing, he said.

"Water is the new oil," and is becoming increasingly privatized, Mulcahy said.

Mindy McIntyre of the Planning Conservation League said California does not have a water problem. The problem, she said, is that water managers are not focusing enough on solutions such as water conservation. The focus on building new dams is misguided, she argued. For the amount of water that will be available from dams, the money spent on the projects is not worth the effort.

Solutions such as widespread use of low-flow toilets and water-saving appliances could vastly cut back on the amount of water used, she said.

There is also vast potential in water recycling, she continued. For example, tainted groundwater could be treated on the surface and then resupplied to the ground for storage.

"We have 1,300 dams in the state," McIntyre said. The opportunities for large storage have already been tapped.

She pointed to opportunities for people to get involved, including writing letters to give input on what is called the "Delta Vision" project for managing water through the Bay Area delta. The long-term plan is to increase pumping of water through the delta, she said. Although those plans have been stalled, the state is increasing the capacity to pump in the future.

She said the Delta Vision project is paid 50 percent by state water contractors, therefore people concerned with water in Northern California should get involved to ensure the process is fair to Northern California water users.

The group ended by brainstorming ideas about how to get the word out and how to get others involved. Some suggested a Web site where people could click to the most pressing issues without dedicating a lot of time to research. One attendee also requested a "to do list" so it was easy to find out the important issues and act on them, such as sending letters to water leaders and policy-makers.

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