

Water and Politics Flow Downhill

By Erik L. Ness

Politics have been part of irrigated agriculture since the first Sumerian ditch bosses controlled the waters of Mesopotamia. The importance of irrigation can be seen throughout the history of mankind as farmers and engineers worked to provide reliable water resources for food and fiber crops and adequate sources of water for the general public.

Today's advanced irrigation systems are economic dynamos that energize local and regional economies far beyond their primary mission of watering important crops. They provide needed hydro-electric power, recreational opportunities, public safety, habitat for wildlife and water conservation initiatives.

As with any system that provides such value and vital economic assets, many interests seek to get their hands on the check valves in an effort to control the water and all that comes with it.

Protecting irrigated agriculture is the primary mission of a group of farmers, ranchers and irrigation organizations called the Family Farm Alliance. One of the organization's main concerns is the fact that many of the attacks on irrigated agriculture are being promulgated through the bureaucratic rule-making process beyond the reach of Congress. Dan Keppen, director of the group, joins others in agriculture who believe congressional oversight hearings related to federal regulations affecting agriculture and water use are in order.

Keppen says there are numerous examples of activist groups and the government trying to shut down irrigation in the name of a bite-sized fish and an over-sized political agenda. Farmers and their water have been under attack in the central valley of California over the delta smelt, and irrigated agriculture was all but shut down by the government in the Klamath Basin of Oregon.

Keppen says there is a determined effort by a number of interest groups to "reallocate" agricultural irrigation water using the tangled tenants of the Endangered Species and the Clean Water Acts. The Klamath Basin Irrigation Project on the California-Oregon border has been providing water for crops and helping with flood control for a century, but since 2001 farmers have seen their water reallocated to meet the "perceived" needs of a species of salmon far downstream. Keppen says such disruptions in the rural systems and economies "lead to uncertainties" in an industry that relies on advanced planning, especially in regard to the amount of water used to produce a crop. The ripple effect of this government action forced Klamath growers to pump ground water at considerable expense or move their operations hours away.

But, there is hope. Farmers in the central valley of California recently received a favorable court ruling that will require the government to reconsider its fish-over-farmer agenda that has cost the local economy billions in lost production and thousands of jobs. A federal judge questioned the validity of the science regarding the delta smelt decision and also ruled that the federal agency

involved must consider the economic impact on humans when making decisions that can impact the entire culture of one of the most productive agricultural areas in the world.

The fact that farmers had to go to court to secure a fair shake is just one more point that highlights the need for congressional oversight of regulators. As has been the case in the West, regulations often deal a staggering blow to local economies. The farm and ranch families who are impacted by such sweeping mandates must remain engaged and involved at every level of government to make sure a little silver fish is not really a red herring.