



California Sportfishing
Protection Alliance

"An Advocate for Fisheries, Habitat and Water Quality"

Embargoed for Release until 8:00 a.m. Thursday: 25 July 2008

For information:

Carolee Krieger, President, California Water Impact Network, (805) 969-0824, caroleekrieger@cox.net

Bill Jennings, Chairman, California Sportfishing Protection Alliance, (209) 464-5067, <mailto:deltakeep@aol.com>

Tom Stokely, Board Member, California Water Impact Network, (530) 524-0315, <mailto:tstokely@trinityalps.net>

Grasslands Bypass Project as Greenwashing Agribusinesses "save" West Side wetlands while irrigation drainage impairs the San Joaquin River, Delta Estuary

"Plumbing as window dressing."

Senator Dianne Feinstein recently wrote to Karl Longley, chair of the Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board (CVRWQCB) to ask how his agency would address ongoing irrigation drainage contamination issues faced by the San Luis Unit Contractors in the western San Joaquin Valley.

Longley proudly replied June 30th to the senior senator from California that his Board has long experience regulating water quality of irrigation drain water and that the Grasslands Bypass Project was a "very successful regulatory program for the Board."

"We require extensive monitoring and reporting to ensure our regulatory standards are met," he wrote to Feinstein, adding that "the Grasslands Bypass Project was achieved through the implementation of performance standards, benchmarks, and other requirements established in" Board regulations. Longley informed Feinstein that "we would use a similar approach" to regulate the San Luis Contractors' irrigation drainage.

"When we saw this letter, we couldn't let this overly rosy picture of the Grasslands Bypass Project go unchallenged," said California Water Impact Network (C-WIN) President Carolee Krieger. "We want Senator Feinstein to get a more balanced picture of what's going on in the San Joaquin Valley. Her leadership is essential on irrigation drainage issues."

"While there have been improvements to water quality in the wetlands compared with the 1980s," pointed out California Sportfishing Protection Alliance (CSPA) Chairman Bill Jennings, "selenium discharges are up this decade, and contamination is now magnified by certain invading aquatic species, like a Siberian shrimp, which bioaccumulates selenium efficiently—too efficiently for the health of its fish and other predators."

The Grasslands Bypass Project (GBP) is a regional sewer collector that captures irrigation drain water from west side irrigated lands and shunts them around Grasslands area wetlands to protect the wildlife refuges and ecosystems established there. GBP water reaches the San Luis Drain where it flows northwest for about 19 miles before it enters Mud

Slough North and then the San Joaquin River a little further downstream. The CVRWQCB issued waste discharge and monitoring requirements for the GBP in 2001.

“The Grasslands Bypass Project is really just greenwashing for these agribusinesses,” adds Krieger. “They can keep discharging large amounts of polluting selenium, salts, and boron into the San Joaquin River, and yet they still claim they’re protecting wetlands in the process. It’s plumbing as window dressing.”

“The Regional Board set the bar for protecting water quality there pretty low,” says C-WIN board member Tom Stokely, “so the agribusinesses there can continue to dump thousands of pounds of selenium into the San Joaquin River every year.”

While the GBP reduced selenium discharges directly through the Grassland Marshes since the 1980s, the bypass channel continues to pour selenium and salts into the San Luis Drain, rerouting problem waters while continuing to burden water bodies downstream in several ways:

- The State Board continually lists as impaired the Grassland Marshes, Salt Slough, and the San Joaquin River (from the Merced River to Delta Boundary) for selenium and electrical conductivity. Downstream, Carquinez Strait and Suisun Bay were also listed as impaired for selenium.
- Waters of the Grasslands and San Joaquin River are listed as impaired by the State Board from chlorpyrifos, diazinon, and Group A Pesticides.
- Disproportionate concentrations of salt and boron enter the San Joaquin River from the Grassland area as well.

C-WIN and CSPA wrote to Senator Feinstein to provide more background to her and her staff this week. “We wanted to give her office the key facts about the GBP independently,” said CSPA Chairman Jennings. “We think that the state and regional boards can still be very much a part of the solutions to these pollution problems that have long plagued the San Joaquin River and the Delta. And we gave her some specific ideas on how to accomplish that.”

One idea is for Senator Feinstein to urge the USEPA and the US Fish and Wildlife Service to collaborate with state agencies to ensure that the waste discharge requirements include meaningful and mandatory load reductions with enforceable timelines sufficient to eliminate the impairment listings of the downstream water bodies. Another, said CSPA’s Jennings, is for these federal agencies to get the state agencies to apply the precautionary principle to lower dramatically the concentrations of selenium, salts, and boron entering west side streams.

Finally, added Krieger, the president of C-WIN, “We urge Senator Feinstein to press the US Bureau of Reclamation to retire the 379,000 acres of drainage impaired lands upstream of the Grasslands area. It’s the most cost-effective and most sensible of all the alternatives studied in the last 25 years. And it will help the Grasslands, the San Joaquin and the Delta. To say the least, it’s overdue.”