

Award Comments
Bill Jennings
Restore the Delta Symposium
28 February 2009

Well, I appreciate this award – and I accept it - because I deserve it.

Alex Hildebrand and Senator Machado deserve it.

Frankly, there are also a number of other people in this room that deserve it.

And, if we're going to save the Delta – its fisheries, agriculture, communities, recreational values and quality of life – a lot more people are going to have to deserve it.

This Delta – one of the marvelous estuaries in the world – is facing an unprecedented attack that threatens to destroy it.

The biological tapestry of the estuary is hemorrhaging. The increasing salinity of its waters threatens some of the most productive farmland on the planet. Rising concentrations of pollutants jeopardize the health those who consume its fish and recreate on its waterways.

The future of our Delta is likely to be decided over the coming decade.

Fishermen, environmentalists and Delta water agencies learned long ago that our fates are irrevocably intertwined.

We understand that a Delta that supports abundant fisheries also supports productive farms and recreation and viable communities.

We'll prosper together or we'll hang together.

The Delta community is a family. We may have occasional family disagreements but we know that outside threats to the family must be faced together.

The fight for our Delta will be waged in the trenches – in seemingly endless agency evidentiary hearings, in the courtroom, in the legislature and in the halls of public opinion.

There is no win, win solution. We live in a water-limited state.

Delta waters can help meet the needs of urban California. But, they cannot continue to supply all of the irrigation needs for non-food and non-staple crops grown on impaired soils of the southern desert.

Junior water rights for surplus water cannot be made superior to the senior water rights of Delta farmers and the public trust needs of the estuary.

Our opponents are extremely well organized, financed and committed. They understand what's at stake.

They're prepared to sacrifice Delta farms and fisheries – indeed, our way of life - in order to continue to irrigate the desert – and to continue to use the San Joaquin River to dispose of toxic wastes.

Their solution is a peripheral canal. They've launched a full-court public relations campaign to approve and fund the canal while keeping most of the details secret: i.e., sizing, construction, locations, how it would be operated, necessary mitigation measures or safeguards or who would pay for it.

However, we know that the diversion of Sacramento water around the Delta would:

1. Transfer pumping impacts to the last viable salmonid river in the Valley.
2. Eliminate “critical habitat” and send numerous species into oblivion.
3. Increase the concentration and bioaccumulation of pollutants.
4. Increase salinity severely reducing yields on hundreds-of-thousands of acres of productive farmland, and
5. Eliminate tens of thousands of fishing, recreational and agricultural jobs.

We know – at least according to the projections in the now infamous PPIC report – that a peripheral canal only exporting 60% of present levels would leave salmon fisheries with only a 20-50% chance of survival and Delta smelt with only 10-40% chance of survival.

We also know that – again based on the PPIC report as refined by UOP's Dr. Michael - that the economic consequence to California from ending Delta exports is less than continuing exports (0.25-0.85 vs. 0.4-0.75 billion/yr).

Finally, we know that eliminating exports would compel us to tap into California's 7 MAF virtual river of conservation and efficiency, recycling and conjunctive use.

That's more water than we export.

Before decision makers start down a path that will destroy this estuary, they need to answer:

1. How much water does the estuary require to maintain ecosystem integrity?
2. Is there any “surplus” water available for export?
3. What are the economic costs and environmental consequences of no or reduced export scenarios?

Before we travel that irrevocable road, we need to compel our regulatory agencies to enforce the water code and clean water act.

What we do over the next few years will determine whether our farms and fisheries – indeed, our way of life survives. The time is now. The fight for the Delta is at hand. Everyone must pitch in and take an active role.

In a way, we're privileged. It comes to few to be in a place and time where history is made – disaster averted. I hope that in a few years, each of you can look back and proudly proclaim to your children and grandchildren, "I helped save the Delta."