



California Sportfishing
Protection Alliance

"An Advocate for Fisheries, Habitat and Water Quality"

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Sen. Feinstein praised for selenium report release C-WIN, CSPA want more tough questions of USBR

Thank you, Senator Dianne Feinstein, for releasing a damning report of selenium treatment technology strategies, and for your leadership on the difficult drainage issues in the San Joaquin Valley, but we want you to ask tougher questions of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation about recent secret proposals for new selenium treatment technologies.

That is the message from Carolee Krieger, president of the California Water Impact Network (C-WIN), and Bill Jennings, executive director of the California Sportfishing Protection Alliance (CSPA), in a letter to the senior U.S. senator from California.

"Senator Feinstein had the foresight to request this important study by the USGS," Krieger said, "and now that it's public, it says the selenium treatment technologies are unproven and dangerous for aquatic birds that would be drawn to contaminated ponds and sprayers. We think this means these treatment technologies are dead on arrival."

On June 5, 2008, Senator Feinstein released to the public a report on selenium treatment technology strategies she requested from the U.S. Geological Survey and five days later wrote to Donald Glaser, regional director of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation in Sacramento to express concerns that important technical problems remain, and requested that the Bureau respond directly to the USGS critique.

The Bureau of Reclamation provides irrigation water to the San Luis Contractors, which includes the Westlands Water District. This water originates in the Trinity Alps west of Redding, and is imported through the Central Valley Project, pumped from the Bay-Delta estuary to the western San Joaquin Valley. The soils in this area of the Valley were once ocean floors and are rich in salts and the metalloid selenium, which can be toxic to birds, wildlife and humans even in small concentrations. Since the mid-1980s, the Contractors have struggled to rid themselves of crippling saline and selenium-contaminated irrigation drainwater that raises regional water tables, ruins once-productive soils, and pollutes the San Joaquin River.

"The USGS report confirms what we've known from the 2007 record of decision by the Bureau, and from lots of other studies," said CSPA's Bill Jennings. "Full land retirement will be the most effective strategy for eliminating selenium and saline drain water from San Joaquin River basin."

C-WIN and CSPA requested Senator Feinstein ask the Bureau's regional director Glaser some tougher questions:

- Why not retire all 379,000 acres of lands impaired by contaminated drainage in the Westlands?
- What other water priorities, including restoration actions, could be served by reallocating Trinity River/Central Valley Project water from the San Luis Contractors to other purposes?
- Are the latest secret proposals by the San Luis Contractors intended to shift responsibility from corporate agribusiness customers of the Contractors back to the federal government?
- Since the new selenium treatment technologies under consideration have never been subject to environmental analysis and disclosure, what plans does the Bureau have to issue a supplemental environmental impact statement?

The ecological risks of selenium in evaporation ponds remain substantial. USGS authors Theresa Presser and Steven Schwarzbach reported elevated selenium concentrations in the eggshells of killdeer, avocets, stilts, and red-winged blackbirds from nests in Panoche Drainage District. Such concentrations could easily cause deformed embryos in these bird species, they said.

"The Contractors can't get around the fact that aquatic birds are always attracted to ponds, pools of water, anything that looks like might be habitat for them," said C-WIN board member Tom Stokely. "Their behavior is powerful, natural, and incredibly toxic to the birds when they land in poisoned areas of the San Joaquin Valley."

The degraded fisheries and water quality of the San Joaquin River and South Delta cannot be restored until toxic discharges of salts and selenium from westside farms are eliminated," added Jennings of CSPA. "Restoration of these vital waterways must not continue to be held hostage by those who have long profited from using subsidized water to irrigate lands that should never have been cultivated in the first place," he added.

"Full retirement of the water contracts to these irrigators and their lands would prevent these problems from ever occurring again," said C-WIN president Krieger. "It's like trying to turn a battleship around with a sailboat, but sooner or later the Bureau has got to come to its senses in the Westlands."