

San Mateo County Times

April 21, 2008

Opposition mounting to Tuolumne plan

Bay Area community passes resolution favoring conservation over siphoning of Sierra river

By Suzanne Bohan

This spring, the tranquil town of Portola Valley joined more than 100 environmental groups and the state Department of Fish and Game in opposing a proposal by the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission to pull an additional 25 million gallons of water daily from the Tuolumne River.

In its Feb. 27 resolution, Portola Valley's Town Council echoed the views of the other organizations: Give the Tuolumne a break, and focus on conservation before pulling more water from the pristine Sierra river.

The San Francisco Board of Supervisors and Tuolumne County Board of Supervisors passed nearly identical resolutions in recent months.

As a decision nears — likely this summer — on the diversion proposal, opponents of the plan are intensifying their efforts to prevent any more draw on the river.

"Things are moving in our direction because we have such a good case," said Peter Drekmeier, Bay Area program director for the Tuolumne River Trust, which is leading opposition to the plan.

But nothing's been set in stone, cautioned Michael Carlin, general manager for water with the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission.

"I want to make sure people understand that we haven't predetermined what we're going to do," Carlin said.

Still, the diversion proposal is listed as a "preferred alternative" in an environmental impact report under review, which is typically the plan adopted. That report largely focuses on the environmental effects of the \$4.3 billion seismic retrofit of the aging Hetch Hetchy pipe system.

Some of the tubes, which originate in the Sierra and deliver water to the Bay Area, are more than a century old. They're vulnerable to breakage during a major earthquake, which could leave Bay Area communities without water supplies following a temblor.

The system provides water for 2.4 million people in San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara and Alameda counties.

But about 60 percent of Tuolumne's water is already siphoned off for agricultural and urban users — and even more in dry years, according to the Tuolumne River Trust.

With the state's growing population and the anticipated decline in Sierra snowpack if climate warming trends continue, now is not the time to take more water from the state's heavily tapped waterways, Drekmeier said. Instead, the focus should turn to conserving and recycling water, he said.

"More than half of that (additional) 25 million gallons would go for watering gardens and lawns," he said. "We believe aggressive conservation is feasible" as an alternative to taking more water.

At stake, Drekmeier said, are beleaguered fish populations in the Tuolumne, particularly the chinook salmon.

Before two dams impeded the river's flow, "hundreds of thousands" of the salmon swam upriver yearly in the fall to spawn, said Tomer Hasson, a program associate with the Tuolumne River Trust, speaking to a small group assembled in Pacifica on Tuesday night to view a slide presentation on the river diversion proposal.

But at last count, fewer than 200 chinook were counted during the fall run, Hasson said. While scientists are studying the catastrophic decline, which could be due to conditions in the ocean and Delta as well — and which are subject to change from year to year — he and others are certain inadequate river water levels play a key role, he said.

"There's going to be less and less water available as global warming takes effect," predicted Hasson, referring to the shrinking Sierra snowpack, which keeps rivers flowing year-round. "And an additional 25 million gallons means there's even less available, and the fish are the last to get it."

The Tuolumne originates high in the Sierra, and its upper stretch in Yosemite National Park was declared a Wild and Scenic River in 1984. From there the river plunges into the Hetch Hetchy reservoir, where about 900 million gallons daily are released through the reservoir's dam to power a hydroelectric plant and replenish the riverbed below, according to Carlin, with the utilities commission. About 230 million gallons each day are also diverted and piped through the Hetch Hetchy water system, he said.

During its journey to the Delta, the Tuolumne also provides habitat for steelhead and rainbow trout, migratory waterfowl and other bird life, yellow-legged frogs, and a range of mammals. And it's a prime recreation area for anglers, boaters and swimmers.

Drekmeier also warned that if the new diversion proposal is approved, the County of Tuolumne has threatened to sue, which would halt the much-needed seismic upgrades as well.

"Nobody wants to slow the seismic upgrades," Hasson added. "The court of public opinion is against that."

Carlin said he couldn't yet respond to talk of legal action halting the project.

"While there have been threats, we'll have to wait to see what happens," he said.

Portola Valley and other entities objecting to the diversion proposal support the Trust's push for conservation and recycling to extend water supplies without tapping the river.

And showing it walks its talk, a new town center under construction in Portola Valley uses ultra low-flow plumbing, waterless urinals, and drought-tolerant landscaping, according to Darin Duncan, a district manager for California Water Services Co., which runs the town's water system.

"Portola Valley is a very active, conservation- and environment-friendly city," he noted.

Drekmeier said Redwood City is also a model of water conservation in the Bay Area, with wastewater in new developments reused for landscape watering and a "great recycling system that's unparalleled."

Carlin said the utility is actively pursuing conservation and recycling strategies, such as a desalination project in the delta, pushing for recycled water use at golf courses, and studying a groundwater recharge system in northern San Mateo County.

"We have aggressive conservation programs," he said.

In the end, if the diversion proposal isn't selected, Carlin said other alternatives listed in the environmental impact report, including extensive water conservation and recycling, may prove feasible.

"There is some concern if we don't get this water," he said. "But if we can pursue and achieve these other alternatives, it might just stave off the diversion."

Reach Suzanne Bohan at sbohan@bayareanewsgroup.com or 650-348-4324