

SF plans river water grab from exhausted Tuolumne River

By Richard Cole

Greener-than-thou San Francisco has a dirty little secret – a plan to drain more water from the already exhausted Tuolumne River and sell it to Hayward, which probably doesn't need it.

Environmentalists, local governments and California Fish and Game officials are raising an uproar about the plan, saying it will further decrease the already dwindling numbers of salmon and trout in the river.

"We have seen dramatic declines in Salmon on the Tuolumne," said Peter Drekmeier of the Tuolumne River Trust. "From 18,000 it has fallen to only 180 in the last eight years – a drop of 99 percent."

Fifty-nine percent of the Tuolumne's natural flow is already siphoned off to San Francisco's Hetch Hetchy water project and various irrigation districts, he noted.

But San Francisco's Public Utilities Commission is proposing to eventually take another 25 million gallons per day from the river, calling it the "preferred alternative" in its environmental draft study.

More water will be needed, not by San Francisco, but by other Hetch Hetchy customers, especially the city of Hayward, which has projected enormous urban growth.

SF: Customers need water

To some degree, said Tony Winnicker, spokesman for the commission, San Francisco is legally bound to satisfy its customers.

"We have 2.4 million customers in four Bay Area counties, and we are obligated to bring them drinking water," he said.

The cities and other entities that buy water have projected an increasing need that will raise Hetch Hetchy's current 265 million gallons a day production to 300 million gallons in the future. But hold on a minute, said Drekmeier.

"Sixty percent of this increased diversion would go to outdoor use, principally irrigation," he said. "We're not talking about water for drinking and bathing – the majority of it would be for watering lawns."

That's a perfect use for recycled water, not fresh Tuolumne River water, he said.

Hayward may revise estimate

Almost half of the increase is for Hayward, and was requested long ago, when heavy growth seemed likely. Current city officials were horrified to find out how much water their city had asked for, and are very likely to revise that estimate, Drekmeier said.

The water diversion could also potentially undermine the one thing that all sides agree on – the seismic strengthening of the outdated Hetch Hetchy water system. Because it is part of the same environmental impact report, likely lawsuits against the water diversion could halt the seismic safety project, a result no one wants, said Drekmeier.

Many local officials – including the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, which will ultimately review the report – are on record as opposing the Tuolumne River diversion.

And the Public Utilities Commission may be seeing the handwriting on the wall, Winnicker indicated.

"We have to meet our customers' demands," he said. "If we can do it in a way that still protects against drought and avoids taking as much water from the Tuolumne, through conservation and recycling say, I know the commission is very interested in that."

And if Hayward or other water customers come to the commission and say they have reduced their projected future demand, that will help preserve the river as well, Winnicker said.