



Dec. 6, 2016

Contact: Steve Knell, OID general manager, (209) 840-5508 or srknell@oakdaleirrigation.com
Peter Rietkerk, SSJID general manager, (209) 249-4645 or prietkerk@ssjid.com

State's plan on river flows devastating for our region

By Steve Knell and Peter Rietkerk

There is a simple reason that an overwhelming number of cities, school districts, business leaders and political officials from throughout San Joaquin, Stanislaus and Merced counties have joined with water agencies and farmers to oppose the state's plan to dramatically increase river flows. It's an irresponsible proposal, one that would have severe economic consequences for an entire region without accomplishing what it purports to do – dramatically increase the salmon populations.

The upcoming public hearings in Stockton, Merced and Modesto conducted by the State Water Resources Control Board will allow all of us who favor sensible, balanced water management to yet again make our case to state officials. Unfortunately, they have given us no reason to think their minds are open.

How else can we interpret their actions? They spent \$70 million over 10 years to develop their plan, yet didn't hold a single public meeting in our area so the public could offer input. Their 3,500-page document virtually ignores proven factors that help create more fish.

Much of that real-world data has been collected on the Stanislaus River, where our two irrigation districts – Oakdale and South San Joaquin – each have funded upward of \$1 million every year for science and fishery research since the early 1990s. The state guesses on salmon counts. We have an exact number, thanks to a state-of-the-art weir that photographs and logs each fish that moves up the river.

We have more information about out-migrating young salmon and steelhead than anyone, but the state won't use it. We know the mortality rate of salmon fry is as high as 95% most years because they are eaten by predators. We know that restoration of spawning beds and habitat works, based on OID's \$1.1 million project with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at Honolulu Bar. We know that salmon returns on the river doubled during the drought, despite no extra flow.

Those facts apparently mean nothing to the water board and its staff.

Despite irrefutable evidence that a comprehensive, coordinated approach will best help salmon, the state plan myopically focuses on water alone. It wants to divert billions of gallons each year by increasing "unimpaired flows" down the Stanislaus, Tuolumne and Merced rivers to 40% between

February and June. It is a water grab based on unscientifically supported assumptions, and distorted and biased modeling of potential impacts.

It also has severe and avoidable economic consequences for our three-county area as well as the foothills communities where many reservoirs are located.

The state's plan would deprive growers of dependable, affordable surface water deliveries that underpin an \$8.5 billion ag-based regional economy. The state suggests as many as 250,000 acres could be fallowed each year, and that thousands of people could lose their jobs on farms and in industries that serve growers or process food. The state lowballs the annual economic damage at \$64 million – about a quarter of even the most conservative local predictions.

It's not just farmers and related businesses who would feel the pain. The state's plan also would impact the source of drinking water for hundreds of thousands of residents in Modesto, Manteca, Lathrop and Tracy. Reducing their reliable source of water supply threatens future growth and economic development. It could make mandatory conservation a permanent way of life.

Unbelievably, the state expects farmers, cities and water districts to make up for the surface water unfairly diverted from them by increasing groundwater pumping by more than 100,000 acre-feet a year. This comes at the same time state leaders already have demanded that sustainable groundwater management practices be developed. Surface water is the biggest tool that water agencies have to preserve drought-stressed aquifers.

Releasing water between February and July also is an inefficient way to generate hydroelectric power. It forces utility companies to create cheap power in the winter and spring when it's not needed as opposed to saving the water in our reservoirs to make clean, affordable power in the summer, when demand is high. Those extra costs are likely to be passed on to consumers.

The state also would have people believe that hijacking billions of gallons a year more water from our three rivers is not somehow connected to Gov. Jerry Brown's plan to build the Twin Tunnels under the Delta. Not evaluating the two projects together makes many of us question the underlying purpose of each.

Visionary investments made generations ago by local farmers provided the money to build the first dams on the Stanislaus, Tuolumne and Merced rivers. The state never invested a dime, yet now it wants to insert itself into critical decisions and overturn more than a century of responsible water management.

Our water rights on the Stanislaus River date to 1853. Today, OID and SSJID provide irrigation water to more than 120,000 acres in two counties. SSJID also delivers clean, affordable drinking water to three cities. In the past decade, we have invested more than \$110 million to modernize and improve our delivery systems – decisions that paid off during the drought when our federal partners on the river needed water. Were it not for our conserved supplies, the salmon and trout populations would have been devastated.

We share the goal of identifying sustainable policies to ensure the vitality and survival of the fishery without wrecking the regional economy. We know there are proven solutions that increase salmon

populations at no additional water cost. We need wise and responsible management of our public resources – now and in the future.

Steve Knell is general manager of the Oakdale Irrigation District. Peter Rietkerk is general manager of the South San Joaquin Irrigation District in Manteca. Together, the districts have formed SavetheStan.org, a public education effort to inform Californians about the threat posed by increased flows on the Stanislaus River.