



THE LOMA PRIETAN

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Diverse Groups Oppose Tuolumne River Water Grab

By Peter Drekmeier

If you're reading this article, chances are your water comes from the Tuolumne River. As a customer, or just a concerned citizen, you can play a vital role in protecting this magnificent "wild and scenic" river.

Although the Tuolumne's natural flow is impeded by two major dams, one of which famously inundates the Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite National Park, it continues to support a remarkable and diverse biological community, including Chinook salmon and steelhead trout. As the largest tributary of the San Joaquin River, it provides fresh water flows that are critical to the health of the Bay-Delta.

Currently, more than half of the Tuolumne is diverted for urban and agricultural uses, and now the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission (SFPUC) is proposing to divert an additional 25 million gallons of water per day. Given the vast potential for water conservation and recycling, this additional diversion is unnecessary and would further harm the ecosystem.

The proposal to divert more water from the Tuolumne is embedded in the SFPUC's Water System Improvement Program (WSIP), a \$4.3 billion plan to upgrade the Hetch Hetchy water system, which provides water for 2.4 million Bay Area residents.

In commenting on the WSIP, the California Department of Fish and Game wrote:

"...we believe that if implemented as proposed, the WSIP would only exacerbate the current decline of anadromous fisheries in the Tuolumne River. Consequently, we respectfully request that the SFPUC use alternative water sources other than the Tuolumne river system or implement water conservation measures to meet drought year demands and 2030 purchase requests..."

The Tuolumne County Board of Supervisors agreed that the River should be protected, and in September passed a resolution that concluded:

"Resolved, that the Tuolumne County Board of Supervisors unequivocally opposes the SFPUC's proposed diversion of an additional 25 million gallons of water a day from the Tuolumne River...The County will seek and exercise the necessary legal remedies to see that no further water diversions occur from the Tuolumne River."

Acknowledging that the WSIP faces an uphill battle, wholesale customers in San Mateo, Santa Clara and Alameda Counties are now supporting an alternative plan that would 1) increase water conservation by 10 million gallons per day, and 2) offset the remaining 15 million gallons per day by paying farmers in the Central Valley to conserve water. While the water conservation aspect of the alternative is commendable, the overall plan is flawed. Here's why:

- 1) The SFPUC would divert 15 million gallons of water per day from the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir, but the water conserved by farmers would not take place until 36 miles downstream at the Don Pedro Reservoir. This would leave a large stretch of the river with depleted flows.
- 2) While the idea of paying farmers in the Central Valley to conserve water is an interesting and creative approach, the two Irrigation Districts, which would have to agree to the agreement, have expressed strong opposition to the plan. They wrote:

“...the draft PEIR envisions the transfer of 27,000 AF (acre feet) of water from the Districts to the CCSF (City and County of San Francisco). The Districts do not believe there is sufficient water within the watershed under dry conditions to support the transfers as described in the Draft PEIR. It is inappropriate, therefore, to include the proposed transfer as a part of the CCSF's water supply plan.”

As the debate rages on, even some agencies that stand to gain from the increased diversion are concerned that this controversial proposal could have the unintentional consequence of delaying the much-needed seismic upgrades to the Hetch Hetchy water system. The City of Hayward, which has projected the greatest increase in water demand, stated:

“We urge the SFPUC not to delay the certification of the PEIR (Program Environmental Impact Report) and implementation of critical reliability projects due to issues related to future demand.”

This comment hit the nail right on the head. We all should be working together to protect our water supply from potential disruptions. We cannot afford to allow the seismic upgrades to get delayed by an ill-conceived water grab.

Please join us in our campaign to protect the Tuolumne River.

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