

October 1, 2008

Connecting the drops

By Sarah Phelan

GREEN CITY A controversial proposal to take more water from the Sierra for urban and agricultural uses — and away from environmental and wildlife habitat needs — could be delayed for at least a decade under a proposal now under consideration in San Francisco.

The San Francisco Public Utilities Commission has toyed with these questions in recent years, confronting the reality that its aging water supply system is at risk seismically and predictions that the region faces a shortfall of 30 million gallons per day by 2030.

To address these concerns, SFPUC produced a Water System Improvement Plan in 2002. WSIP included plans to retrofit and rebuild key dams and pipelines. But the \$4.4 billion proposal ran into opposition when environmental advocates learned it also contained an option to increase diversions from the Tuolumne River by 25 million gallons per day.

Jennifer Clary, executive director of Clean Water Action, pointed out that 60 percent of the water flow in the Tuolumne River — which is blocked by two dams — has already been diverted for urban and agricultural uses and its historic salmon run has been destroyed.

Peter Drekmeier, Bay Area program director of Tuolumne River Trust, told the *Guardian* there's been a 99 percent decline in the river's salmon population. "We counted 18,000 salmon in 2000, but only 211 in 2007," he told us.

This environmental opposition appears to have led to a change in plan, at least for now.

The San Francisco Planning Department is preparing to publish its final Program Environmental Impact Report on the SFPUC's plan and SFPUC General Manager Ed Harrington announced a Sept. 30 press conference to discuss a regional water supply alternative.

The conference took place after *Guardian* press time, but SFPUC officials say the supply question won't get answered until 2018, although seismic projects are getting the green light. As SFPUC director of communications Tony Winnicker explained, seismic proposals can't start until the EIR is certified, first by the Planning Commission and then by the SFPUC.

"So it made sense to pursue an alternative that allowed those projects to move forward, while giving the agency another decade to answer the supply question," Winnicker said.

"Rather than holding up the ticking time bomb of seismic upgrades, this allows us to certify the EIR and adopt an alternative that takes no more water until 2018."

He said water demand in San Francisco is predicted to decrease, but will be offset by projected growth in the South and East Bay during that time. Winnicker said he hopes the SFPUC can meet that projected demand through increased groundwater conservation, recycling, and desalination.

"But we can't point to projects on the ground yet," he said. "So what we're saying is, 'OK, we're not going to take anything out of river now and we'll wait a decade to figure it out — by which time we'll have better technology, information, and analysis, plus a better understanding of climate change.'"

Drekmeier says the SFPUC's recommendation is not his first choice. "We believe more water needs to be released to restore the chinook salmon, as well as the steelhead trout, and we're going to be lobbying [the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission] for less diversions," Drekmeier said. "But in the spirit of compromise, this gives us more time to do a more detailed estimate of demand projections and the potential for water recycling and allows for the completion of biological studies of the needs of the Tuolumne."

Meanwhile, Clary said the SFPUC recommendation represents progress. "Nobody really knows how much water we need to put into the Tuolumne River," Clary said. "I think ultimately more water will have to go to the environment. But we should strive to get the information we need to be good stewards. This gives us time to prove that the SFPUC doesn't need more water, and to work with the water agencies and retail customers."

The Planning Commission is scheduled to hold a hearing on the EIR certification Oct. 30 — the same day the SFPUC chooses a WSIP option. As Drekmeier puts it, "Oct. 30 will be the moment of truth."