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Rush to complete river restoration project would hurt fish and farmers

The San Joaquin River Exchange Contractors Water Authority together with its member agencies the Central California Irrigation District, San Luis Canal Company, Firebaugh Canal Water District, and the Columbia Canal Company (Exchange Contractors) filed an objection today with the California State Lands Commission under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) to stop the United States Bureau of Reclamation's unreasonable rush to complete part of the San Joaquin River Restoration Program near the town of Mendota. The misguided plan would have devastating impacts on farmers and the very fish it is designed to protect.

"This 'hurry up' approach before all of the proper design activities have taken place is going to cause bigger problems for endangered salmon as well as for the farmers with land adjacent to the river," said Chris White, CCID General manager. "Ramming through this part of the restoration program creates a scenario where the infrastructure needed to protect fish, such as fish screens, isn't going to be built until later, if at all. That's a big problem that should concern anyone who supports the restoration program," he said.

California's broken water management system is once again ignoring local input and could end up hurting the very fish it is trying to protect, as well as impose devastating effects on area farmers. Rather than follow a sensible plan for the San Joaquin River Restoration Program, the federal water bureaucracy is rushing to put things in place that won't work without the steps that should come first.

Other parts of Reclamation's plan include increasing flows in the river in order to move sediment downstream. Reclamation has acknowledged, however, that current modeling doesn't account for increased sediment being flushed into the Mendota Pool, jeopardizing water deliveries to over 350,000 acres of farmland and local wildlife refuges.

There is also insufficient funding for Reclamation to complete planned levee re-construction that is designed for fish restoration flows and also vital for the continued delivery of water supply to the 350,000 acres of farmland and local wildlife refuges. In addition, the planned bypass only works with a functional fish screen, which is not yet designed let alone funded.

"We strongly encourage the California State Lands Commission to reject the hasty plan by Reclamation because of the consequences it has for farmers and the fish the program is trying to protect," said White. "Rushing it through without the proper planning and phasing of the project is a waste of taxpayer dollars and a burden on the people who depend on area farms for their livelihoods," he said.

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