SAN JOAQUIN: More than million acres of farmland came to life after water project

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ley’s fertile plains, past farms that feed the nation. See how it reaches for the Pacific through the San Francisco Bay.

That river doesn’t exist.

The thin blue line is a memory, useful only as a picture of the past. No part of the San Joaquin reaches the ocean now. No salmon swim against its current to spawn. Its waters, trapped behind dams, disappear into California’s intricate plumbing system — channels most maps don’t show.

For some, the line on the map also represents the future — one future scenario anyway — if one of the nation’s longest-running environmental battles succeeds in forcing the release of enough water down the old riverbed to bring back the salmon.

But the line on the map is simple. The real San Joaquin takes many more turns.

It begins as fresh snowmelt, streaming from Mount Ritter’s gray granite faces into Thousand Island Lake, a bouldered mirror of the 13,000-foot tower. The clear blue water spills out through a narrow canyon, and the San Joaquin River is born.

When conservationist and mountaineer John Muir first explored these upper reaches, the narrow gorge barely contained the power of the living river, which had carved a path down the Sierra Nevada, carrying the continent’s southernmost salmon run, sustaining Indian tribes and setting the rhythm of life in the valley below with great floods and droughts.

“Certainly this Joaquin Canyon is the most remarkable in many ways of all I have entered,” Muir wrote in August of 1873.

The country was still pushing westward then, edging aside those who had lived here before. Towns sprang up along the railroads, and the first plows cut through California’s vast Central Valley.

Muir fought the river’s first diversions, inspiring early environmentalists, but he couldn’t stop waves of migrants from felling in the valley and building small irrigation projects and dams to curb the floods and feed their fields.

Agriculture began driving the state’s economy, and California was booming.

But by the early 20th century, farmers were pumping their wells dry. Between drought and the Great Depression, farmers were being forced off their land just as Dust Bowl migrants were flowing into California.

Residential developments are seen along the San Joaquin River, top, in this aerial view in May in Fresno.

Politicians realized that with a stable water supply, California could feed and employ millions. And the San Joaquin, which drains an area larger than the states of New York and New Jersey as it cascades 10,000 feet down the Sierra Nevada, could provide both water and electricity for the region.

By 1935, Congress approved emergency funds for the Central Valley Project, with the massive Friant Dam at its concrete heart and open channels radiating north and south. Friant’s construction in 1944 put an end to the farmers’ concerns, reviving the economy.

Towns blossomed along the canals. More than a million acres of farmland came to life, producing more than 200 crops including oranges, almonds, grapes and cotton.

“It made this valley live,” said Harvey Bailey, whose family grows 1,100 acres of oranges and lemons in Orange Cove, 50 miles south of the dam.

But the 314-foot concrete wall changed the river as well. Most years, less than 5 percent of the historic flow goes down the old riverbed — just enough to remind locals of what they lost.

“A terrible injustice was done to that river,” said Bud Rank, whose family farmed on both riverbanks before the dam was built. “It was irrigation water, but it was a thing of beauty, too.”

Bud’s father, Everett, and other downstream farmers watched the San Joaquin’s water drop out of reach of their pumps, which were left perched high on the riverbanks like giant mechanical mosquitoes.

They went door to door to raise money for a lawyer, and 16 years later, their case finally reached the Supreme Court. Everett Rank borrowed money to go to Washington, but the case was turned down on a technicality. He was devastated — suffered a heart attack on his way home — and died soon thereafter.

“We lost, but really, it was the river that lost, and all the things that lived in the river,” Rank said.

The San Joaquin now surrenders to parched sand and gravel just 37 miles below the dam. Where spawning Chinook salmon once ran so thick that people compared the sound to a waterfall, lizards and tumbleweed litter a riverbed that often goes years without water.

And that has led to another long-running legal battle — 17 years ago, environmental activists sued the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, accusing the agency of violating state law by not letting enough water flow to maintain the historic salmon population.

In October 2004, a federal judge in Sacramento agreed, prompting angry protests across the valley.

Farmers, mayors and businessmen pointed out that their towns, jobs and crops have relied on San Joaquin river water for decades — and would only grow thirstier now that some of the state’s fastest growing cities are in the Central Valley.

The court’s decision only opens the door to the real question — how to balance the needs for such a scarce and essential public resource in the decades ahead.