San Joaquin River is ‘hard-working,’ ‘abused’

Dams spurred economic growth but diverted water; waste runoff creates dump

On maps of California, the San Joaquin River flows down from the Sierra Nevada through much of the Central Valley. In reality, almost all the water is channeled north and south from Friant Dam, feeding some of the nation's most productive farmland. Many growing towns also owe their existence — and their future — to the diverted water. And now thirsty new rivals are eyeing the same flows.

This is the last of three articles on the river.

By JULIANA BARBASS
The Associated Press

In the bow of his small motorboat, pipe protruding from his snowy beard, Bill Jennings looks more pirate than protector of the marshy delta where the San Joaquin River meets the ocean. A trickling stream flows behind him, but beyond that the river usually runs dry. For about 20 miles — until the flow is restored by delta water pumped in from the California Aqueduct that also delivers drinking water to Southern California — it's a dusty riverbed, home to lizards, weeds and garbage.

For the rest of its course, the river serves as a drain, taking leftover irrigation water from farm fields, mixing fertilizers, pesticides and other chemicals with runoff from city streets and golf courses and what little water still flows beyond the dams on the San Joaquin's tributaries. Then it empties into the delta, where water is again pumped south again in an endless loop.

“‘This is a watery landfill,’” said Jennings. “You can see there's no pride in the river here.”

Los Angeles also depends on this brackish delta water, which is pumped 330 miles down the west side of the valley. The Metropolitan Water District, serving 17 million Southern Californians, is already the largest customer for delta water and has coveted San Joaquin River water, especially since California's share of the Colorado River was cut by 15 percent two years ago.

For several years now, there have been discussions about a swap that would give Los Angeles cleaner San Joaquin River water that now irrigates crops. Farmers on the east side of the valley, in exchange, would be allowed to use the MWD's storage facilities, providing better access to water in dry years. To make economic sense, the swap would have to involve at least a coalition of fishing and environmental organizations that seek to restore the river, flushing out the pollution with enough mountain water to bring back the river's historic salmon population.

Environmentalists like Jennings imagine what the river, and the delta — another ecosystem whose viability seems to be at a threshold — could be if flushed clean by melted snow every year.

“The delta can't be fixed unless the delta can be fixed unless water allowed to run the length of that river,” Jennings said.

“That's the bottom line.”