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Another View: Bear River dam proposal is deeply flawed

By: David Ryland

The Nevada Irrigation District (NID) has begun the steps to construct a 275 foot dam on the Bear River, just upstream of Combie Reservoir. This impoundment will flood six miles of the river, including the picnic area and campground at Plum Tree Road in Placer County. The dam will also eliminate the only road crossing between Auburn and Colfax, at the Dog Bar Road bridge. There are no definitive proposals to create an alternative crossing, but the only possible alternative would have to be on or below the dam - and all traffic would then be routed through Meadow Vista. It should also be noted that the intended reservoir would turn this lovely river corridor into an ugly holding tank with 100 foot fluctuations in the high water mark. At the upper portions of the reservoir, and at some lowland reaches downstream, this will leave a barren landscape where beautiful riparian habitat has existed for millennia.

The public should not presume that this dam, known as the Centennial Reservoir Project, is a mere pipe dream or speculative concept for NID. The district is in the midst of land acquisitions that will displace 25 homes and about 120 private property parcels. They have also bypassed the local office of the Bureau of Land Management to acquire public lands, dealing directly with offices distant from the project. NID has rallied friends in high places, as the project is supported by Representatives LaMalfa and McClintock. There is clear intent to build this dam regardless of the desires of the majority of the citizens who are directly affected by its construction.

I urge all citizens to voice their opinion about the impact of this proposed dam. You have until April 18th to register your comments with NID, and it is critical that you tell them what they should consider in their Environmental Impact Report.

Please visit the NID website www.centennialreservoir.org and www.savebearriver.com for more information.

Submit your comments to - tassone@nidwater.com - in order for NID to consider your position on this project.

It is important to note that NID is required to seek public comment about the project, and they must consider alternatives to the reservoir. In my opinion, there are two significant alternative concepts that NID needs to engage. Recharging the water table is the first alternative that we must review. Secondly, thoughtful and efficient conservation strategies must be promulgated. My arguments for these alternatives are detailed below.

Construction of dams to create surface storage is a bad idea. It has been said that it is a 19th Century solution to a 21st Century problem, and I agree. We are smarter than that, we are better than that. In a technological era that covets elegance and thoughtful composition, a 275 foot dam is anything but. More appropriately, we must repay what we owe the aquifers in the foothills and the Central Valley. Ground water recharge is efficient and it is environmentally just. Reservoirs are horrible water wasters because the loss of storage from evaporation during the warmer months of the year is immense. If that same water is allowed to flow in to the valley, or is pumped back in to the water table, it is protected from this significant source of loss. And, out of respect and appreciation for the agricultural interests of our state, it replenishes the immense amount of water that has been pumped out of the aquifers.

That said, there is a crying need to reign in the consumptive demands of all Californians. The recent drought has proved that we have the ability to do this, but my offhand observations show that some folks just don't "get it". I recall bicycling down the west shore of Lake Tahoe last summer, past high-end homes with beautiful lawns and landscaping that ignored the posted conservation notices right along their streets. Then there was the elevated Rainbird sprinkler in Newcastle, spraying water over pastureland late afternoon in September. I believe that NID has the capacity and the responsibility to identify the segments of their customer base that are using a disproportionate share of the water they already provide. Water rates and delivery mechanisms can be tweaked to promote higher efficiency from consumers. Let's do that before we even consider destroying the last free flowing stretch of the Bear River between Dutch Flat and Meadow Vista.

Obliterating the river canyon to satisfy an unquenchable beast is not something I am willing to support. Having spent two decades on this stretch of the river, mostly fly-fishing, I can state with authority that it is a very diverse and thriving ecosystem.

David Ryland holds a zoology degree from Humboldt State University, with an emphasis in Fisheries Biology. He is a 20 year resident of Meadow Vista and has spent nearly four decades as a mortgage banker in Placer County.