

S.J. protests wild, scenic proposal for Mokelumne

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Long thirsty for Mokelumne River water, San Joaquin County appears poised to oppose legislation that would designate 37 miles of the upper stream as wild and scenic.

The county fears such a designation could block future dams upstream of Pardee Lake and could undermine recent efforts by diverse interest groups to work together to cooperatively manage the stream.

The matter could be decided as soon as today, when the bill by Sen. Loni Hancock, D-Berkeley, may be approved in the Senate, or otherwise left for dead.

But San Joaquin County wasn't waiting to find out what the outcome would be.

Last week, an advisory water commission recommended the county oppose Hancock's SB 1199, warning in a draft letter that projects "critical" to meeting the future needs of the county would never happen if the 37-mile stretch of the Mokelumne upstream of Pardee is declared wild and scenic.

One such project in that area, the enlargement of Pardee, has already been abandoned by the East Bay Municipal Utility District, which diverts the lion's share of the Mokelumne to the Bay Area. No additional dams or diversions have been formally proposed.

Still, San Joaquin County says in its letter that in light of threats such as climate change, projects on the Mokelumne may be needed decades down the road.

When the State Water Project was built in the 1960s, North Coast streams that were originally supposed to contribute water to the project were declared off limits, the county notes. A half-century later, the project is limited in how much water it can provide to Southern California, putting particular strain on the overtapped Delta.

The county's draft letter criticizes Mokelumne environmental groups for moving their cause directly to the Legislature, even while participating in those ongoing discussion forums.

Hancock's bill was introduced "without any of us knowing," the county's water resources coordinator, Brandon Nakagawa, told commissioners last week.

"Presumably, we could have used the forum to talk about wild and scenic designation," Nakagawa said. "Perhaps there could be room for a stakeholder discussion in the future, but we'd like to see it come out of the Legislature" and discussed as a group.

Katherine Evatt, president of the nonprofit Foothill Conservancy, said in an email Wednesday that it was "no surprise" San Joaquin County water interests would object to the bill, since "they have been hoping to build dams on the upper Mokelumne for decades."

"It would be interesting to see just how much money San Joaquin agencies have wasted trying to build dams that foothill communities are never going to accept," Evatt said.

When those group discussions about the Mokelumne began, water agencies made it clear they intended to continue pursuing water rights applications and projects on the stream, Evatt added.

"It's totally unfair to say that river advocates should stop work we have been doing to protect the Mokelumne until the water agencies find a way to get along and come up with a plan," she said.

Some new water diversions have been allowed on California's state-designated wild and scenic rivers, according to a legislative analysis of Hancock's bill, but only where the free-flowing nature of a stream is not affected.

Environmentalists, Mother Lode businesses and Calaveras County have supported the wild and scenic designation. Opposed are farmers, upstream water agencies and East Bay MUD.

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