

Viewpoints: All sides in water wars should get behind protecting Mokelumne

By Bill Jennings and Jerry Meral
Special to The Bee / August 13, 2014

People who follow California's water wars may wonder whether experts who disagree on the Bay Delta Conservation Plan ever agree on anything at all. The answer is yes. We agree it's time to protect 37 miles of the Central Sierra's Mokelumne River as a state Wild and Scenic River.

Sen. Loni Hancock, D-Oakland, introduced the legislation to protect the river, Senate Bill 1199, which is now in the state Assembly. The legislation would bar new dams and diversions on 37 miles of the "Moke" between Salt Springs Dam and Pardee Reservoir and protect the river's water quality. It has no relationship to the larger water fights in the state but should be judged on its own merits.

Hancock represents the communities of Oakland, Berkeley and Richmond on the east side of San Francisco Bay. Each of those cities voted in recent years to support Wild and Scenic River designation for the Mokelumne. Every person and business in Hancock's district depends on the high-quality water from the Mokelumne. In fact, businesses such as Berkeley's Trumer Brauerei located there expressly because of the water quality SB 1199 would protect.

Where does that water originate? The Mokelumne tumbles down from high Sierra peaks, rushing through deep, forested canyons before it meanders through the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta to its confluence with the San Joaquin River east of Antioch. Along the way, this hard-working river provides water for foothill communities, Valley agriculture and more than 1.4 million East Bay customers. Its Pacific Gas & Electric hydropower project powers more than 200,000 homes.

SB 1199, which was approved by the Senate in May, would protect that water and power investment. And it would provide balance by protecting the extraordinary values the upper Mokelumne offers our state: a rich American Indian cultural history, significant California historical sites, remarkable scenic beauty, high water quality and recreational opportunities for everyone, including adrenaline-powered whitewater kayakers and urban families seeking quiet, riverside campsites.

Protecting the Mokelumne is critical for the struggling foothill communities near the river. Designating the river "Wild and Scenic" would brand it as a must-see, world-class destination, drawing more visitors and benefiting the local small businesses that depend on them.

Destination Angels Camp, a local economic development group, said this in support of SB 1199: "Protection of the Mokelumne will enhance the economy of Angels Camp and the other rural communities of Amador and Calaveras Counties. Purchases of food,

gasoline, lodging, and merchandise benefit a variety of local businesses including gas stations, grocery stores, motels, restaurants, and small shops. That spending, in turn, supports local jobs and tax revenue.”

The river is a place Californians of all ages, abilities and income levels visit to escape the cares of daily life, a place to teach children about nature and connect with our state’s rich natural and cultural history, including its quickly vanishing wilder side.

Some legislators have been reluctant to support a river protection bill in such a dry year. But there are no dams proposed for the sections of the Mokelumne included in SB 1199, either for water or hydropower. The bill would not affect PG&E’s planned off-stream pumped storage project near the river or the East Bay Municipal Utility District’s long-term water plan. It would not bar water development on tributary streams, reoperation of PG&E’s hydroelectric project for local water supply or downstream expansion of EBMUD’s Pardee Reservoir. In fact, SB 1199 would move agencies that rely on the Mokelumne to the least expensive, least environmentally damaging, most feasible options for future water supply.

SB 1199 would protect 37 miles of the Mokelumne in perpetuity as a historically, environmentally and culturally significant place – one that would join the other unique California places we enjoy today only because people before us had the foresight to protect them. And it would do so without harming our state’s ability to meet future water or energy needs.

It is our turn to leave this river as our legacy for generations to come. We urge the members of the Legislature and the governor to support this important river protection measure by enacting and signing SB 1199.

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