

Fresno Bee

Editorial: Water crisis looms; Dramatic decline of smelt is a troubling sign of a sick estuary

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It's easier for us all to understand certain problems. When a tanker truck carrying gasoline overturns and ignites a freeway fire that crumbles a section of Oakland's MacArthur Maze, the impact on transportation is readily apparent. Or when two Humpback whales wander deep into the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, the rareness of this deviation is instinctive.

But there is another problem unfolding in the Delta involving a tiny fish known as a smelt. Biologists who track these fish should be finding thousands of them this time of year. Instead, they are finding a handful. The smelt are indicators of the overall health of the estuary.

Their dramatic decline could have a huge impact on the state. Management of our largest water sources, the state and federal pumps in the southern Delta, hangs in the balance. What's worrisome is that the experts may know more about nudging whales from the Delta than preventing these smelt from disappearing.

This vanishing tiny fish could very soon present Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger with his first, true water crisis. None of the choices are easy, but running from the problem may be the riskiest of them all.

Environmental groups are expected to go to court demanding tougher enforcement of the California Endangered Species Act. Courts have threatened to take over control of the Delta before. It is inevitable unless fixing the Delta gets the same urgency as fixing the MacArthur Maze.

This is a sick estuary for many reasons. Invasive species such as Asian clams have taken hold. The food supply is profoundly altered. And the pumps in the southern Delta are changing the natural flow in the system. To sustain the state's economy, water must flow from north to south through the Delta. Nature intended the water to flow west into San Francisco Bay. Engineers and biologists have never resolved that conflict.

The level of pumping is a political obsession for obvious reasons. Southern California and San Joaquin Valley farmers rely on this supply. Many environmentalist believe the pumps are the core problem. Regardless, the pumps are the one variable in this very complex system that can be adjusted. They are the one dial that a judge can turn off (one threatened to recently; the case is on appeal).

If the state were to slow the pumps enough to prevent flows from reversing in the system, the impact could be huge -- a 50% cut in water supply. Imagine every other freeway lane going out of service until a solution is found for air pollution. That's one scenario for the Delta. Another is to find some "compromise" that eases the impact to farmers and the southland. But if the smelt don't buy the compromise, a judge won't. The Endangered Species Act is an unforgiving club when a species is about to vanish.

The smelt aren't a lovable fish. It doesn't matter. The real-world impact of a dysfunctional Delta is something that eventually we would all understand.