

Sacramento Bee

Editorial: Delta's silent pumps signal the need for change. Much is wrong in this essential resource, and the tiny Delta smelt are not to blame

June 3, 2007

California's electricity crisis a few years back is remembered for its bizarre blackouts. They resulted from a system that grew more dysfunctional over time until the lights simply couldn't stay on.

Now California's water world is getting a taste of its version of blackouts. In the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, an endangered two-inch smelt is forcing a historic shutdown of pumps that supply 23 million residents and 5 million acres of farmland. Water will continue to flow from taps and onto fields during this shutdown as the water districts find various ways to maintain a steady supply.

Never before have Delta pumps gone silent because of an endangered fish. And like the electricity crisis, the Delta debacle hints that it will get worse (maybe a lot) before it gets better.

This isn't an exact replica of the electricity problem. In electricity, government made some epically bad decisions when it tried to set up a market system to generate power. That market failed spectacularly. In water, the core problem is indecision by government, an inability to make huge, difficult decisions about managing a Delta estuary facing multiple threats.

The Delta ecosystem is an increasingly complex stew of invasive species, toxic pesticides, unstable levees and rising sea levels. Meanwhile at the pumps, run by the State Water Project and the federal Central Valley Project, operators have tried to adjust the pumping, sometimes pumping less, sometimes diverting record supplies. The adjustments amount to tinkering with a plumbing regime that isn't sustainable.

The Delta smelt are an anchor of the food chain and an indicator of the overall health of the ecosystem. Trawling with nets throughout the Delta this spring, biologists found fewer than 30. That set off the alarm bells and slowed the pumping. But when a population of smelt drifted toward the pumps about a week ago and the pumps began to kill the fish, the system went into blackout mode. So long as the smelt are in the southern Delta (the species migrates into the bay in the summer), the pumps are silent. How long? No one knows.

Close observers of California's water world may remember the last drought cycle in the early 1990s, which triggered changes at the pumps and a political effort known as Cal-Fed to fix the estuary. Back in May 1994, the pumps killed more than 160,000 smelt, and operators kept pumping. This May, the state and federal projects killed about 400 smelt. That relatively small tally is now a big deal because there is no doubt that the species is in trouble.

Solutions? Water and environmental interests both have incentives to ensure that toxic drainage from agriculture stays out of the Delta. A similar urgency is necessary to address invasive species and suburban sprawl that are harming the smelt.

The pumping debate, as always, overshadows everything. This kind of debate only gets resolved by a thorough study process and a political willingness to make a tough decision. This process is under way, as wildlife agencies, the University of California, Davis, and a "Delta Vision" task force all are working on recommendations to shape a legislative debate next year. Meanwhile, the pumps are subject to blackouts. Don't blame those smelt. We made this mess. We have to fix it by somehow doing right by the Delta.