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Editorial: Be skeptical of water promises

Our view: A conference last week in Chico served as a reminder that if an area loses its water rights, it loses much more than that.

If history has taught us anything about water in California, it's that everybody should be extremely skeptical when somebody who wants to take your water says, "Don't worry."

That point was driven home again last week in Chico at a two-day water conference hosted by AquAlliance.

Water managers and biologists spoke about promises made and promises broken. Despite assurances that fisheries and river ecosystems would not be harmed, stories about the health of the Trinity River, Mono Lake, San Joaquin River and more prove otherwise.

Those examples are important for us in the north state to remember. After all, we have water. Most of the state does not. People on the outside see water flowing down the river and see dollar signs. They hear about our massive underground aquifer and think of it as water going to waste.

State and federal water managers trying to craft a delta conservation plan or trying to compensate for water lost through court cases would like to tap into our water. They say, of course, that the north state would not be harmed, that fish and soils would not suffer in the least.

That is, of course, what they said about the Owens Valley and other more recent examples, such as the Trinity River. We should be careful about not falling for the same promises.

Imagine a north state with significantly less water. It would cut into agriculture production, which is a driving force in our economy. Green rice fields and almond orchards could become fallow dirt.

Less water also would mean fewer visitors — and ecotourism is a growing force in our economy, whether it's canoeing and kayaking, salmon fishing, birdwatching or people visiting farms and wineries.

The natural beauty of the north state is what draws many people to settle here. Shipping more water south could detract from the unique natural setting.

And don't try to convince us that could never happen. We've seen it too often — and people spend years trying to pick up the pieces.

Tom Stokely, for example, has fought for the Trinity River watershed for decades. He spoke at last week's conference about his long fight. The federal government decided in the 1960s that it would ship a good portion of the Trinity River's flow east, over mountains and into the Sacramento Valley through a series of tunnels and reservoirs rather than let all of that water flow into the ocean north of Eureka.

That brought more water to "our" river (so more could be sent to San Joaquin Valley farmers) but nearly killed "their" river.

Because of the efforts of North Coast Indian tribes and people like Stokely, some water has been restored to the Trinity. The river's legendary salmon and steelhead runs have made a comeback. There is, however, a long way to go. They would like to see all water stay in the Trinity River watershed. It's a lifelong fight.

It's worth remembering that people in Trinity County, or Mono County or along the San Joaquin River corridor didn't have much say in the matter. The government just said, "This is what we're doing." We all need to be vigilant if we hear something similar about our water.