



COUNTY OF YOLO

Office of the County Administrator

Patrick S. Blacklock
County Administrator

625 Court Street, Room 202 Woodland, CA 95695
(530) 666-8150 FAX (530) 668-4029
www.yolocounty.org

December 1, 2014

Brad Hubbard
United States Bureau of Reclamation
2800 Cottage Way, MP-410
Sacramento, CA 95825

Frances Mizuno
San Luis and Delta-Mendota Water Authority
P.O. Box 2157
Los Banos, CA 93635

Re: Comments on Draft EIS/EIR on Proposed Long-Term Water Transfers

Dear Mr. Hubbard and Ms. Mizuno:

The County of Yolo ("County") submits this letter to provide its initial comments on the Long Term Water Transfers Draft Environmental Impact Statement/Environmental Impact Report ("Draft EIS/EIR"). The County is continuing to review the Draft EIS and may submit further comments in early 2015.

Altogether, the Executive Summary of the Draft EIS/EIR indicates that up to 86,000 acre-feet of surface water could be transferred each year from 2015 through 2024 from properties within Yolo County to buyers in the San Luis & Delta-Mendota Water Agency ("SLDMA") service area, as well as the Contra Costa Water District and East Bay Municipal Utility District. The County's comments focus on proposed transfers within Yolo County and, in particular, on the potential transfer of up to 35,000 acre-feet annually ("af/yr") from Conaway Ranch. Notwithstanding this letter's focus on transfers from Yolo County, however, the following comments apply equally to other proposed transfers and the Draft EIS/EIR generally.

1. General Comments.

As an overall matter, the County disagrees with the conclusion that Alternative 2 (the "Proposed Action" analyzed in the Draft EIS/EIR) will not have any significant, unavoidable adverse effects. Even considering the "environmental commitments" described in Chapter 2 of the Draft EIR/EIS, it is objectively unreasonable to conclude that the potential transfer of slightly over 500,000 af/yr and associated groundwater substitutions, cropland idling, and other measures within the selling areas will somehow not cause any significant, unavoidable adverse effects. There are a host of specific reasons why this conclusion is inappropriate, including an overreliance on assumptions that lack a sound evidentiary basis and other factors discussed in the following section of this letter.

Altogether, these analytical flaws distort the comparison of the Proposed Action to other alternatives that could reduce environmental effects associated with cropland idling (Alternative 3) and groundwater substitutions (Alternative 4). The deficient analysis of the Proposed Action's environmental effects compromises the analysis of Alternatives 3 and 4, as well as the ultimate conclusion that those alternatives are not "environmentally superior"

to the Proposed Action. The timeframe for analysis—a ten-year period between 2015 and 2024—is also artificial and appears to have been contrived for the purpose of environmental analysis, independent of any proposed transactions or other relevant factors. A shorter transactional timeframe (such as five years) should be used to ensure that environmental effects are appropriately studied as they become apparent, rather than dismissed several years from now by virtue of the inappropriate use of a ten-year period in the Draft EIS/EIR.

These fundamental flaws in the Draft EIS/EIR are alone sufficient to support revising the document in several respects, as noted more specifically below. The Draft EIS/EIR should also be recirculated for further public review after these deficiencies are addressed.

2. Issue-Specific Comments.

The County's specific comments fall into three categories: (A) subsidence and public safety; (B) agricultural and economic impacts; (C) impacts on terrestrial species, including migratory waterfowl.

A. Subsidence and Public Safety.

The Draft EIS/EIR fails (albeit understandably) to consider recent information relating to subsidence on the Conaway Ranch during the Summer of 2014. A copy of the report on subsidence produced by MBK Engineers on November 12, 2014 is attached hereto. As that report documents, portions of the Conaway Ranch subsided by up to 17 centimeters (6.5 inches) in a three-month period. That three-month period coincided with the transfer of about 25,000 af of surface water to the Tehama-Colusa Canal Authority via groundwater substitution.

The County acknowledges that it is not possible to determine the relative contribution of increased groundwater pumping and the fallowing of thousands of acres of farmland on Conaway Ranch to the observed subsidence. However, the overall circumstances support a serious concern that further surface water transfers will cause or contribute to similar effects if up to 35,000 af/year is transferred from Conaway Ranch in the future (in addition to 10,000 af/year that Conaway Preservation Group is contractually obligated to deliver to local cities). This concern is particularly acute because the Yolo Bypass passes through Conaway Ranch. The levees of the Yolo Bypass are already known to suffer from various deficiencies, as documented in the Draft EIR for the Central Valley Flood Protection Plan in 2012 and numerous other public documents. Subsidence can further compromise levee integrity (Draft EIS/EIR at p. 3.3-28) and, in turn, increase public safety risks within Yolo County.

Further analysis is required in the Draft EIS/EIR to determine the potential magnitude of such effects and, in addition, to enable proper consideration of the findings required for surface water transfers by Water Code § 1745.10 (relating to conditions of long-term overdraft in affected groundwater basins). These are serious concerns that deserve specific attention in the Draft EIS/EIR, which should be recirculated after it is revised to include a discussion of the new information available on subsidence within the Conaway Ranch. The potential for adverse short-term subsidence effects should also be considered, as even subsidence of a limited duration could impact levee integrity and increase public safety risks (as well as the environmental consequences of large-scale inundation of urban areas if the Yolo Bypass levees fail).

In addition, Mitigation Measure GW-1 (Monitoring Program and Mitigation Plans) is legally inadequate. By its own terms, it applies only if "substantial adverse impacts" are determined to occur as a consequence of increased groundwater pumping due to surface water transfers. (Draft EIS/EIR at p. 3.3-90.) It assumes, without any apparent basis, that such "substantial adverse impacts" are entirely reversible and can be reduced to a less than significant level through mitigation plans backed by "financial assurances." Much more is needed to explain the conclusion that such mitigation plans will be effective, that adequate financial assurances can be provided (particularly for impacts on major public infrastructure such as levees), and that Mitigation Measure GW-1 is otherwise sufficient in all instances to reduce even the short-term adverse effects of subsidence and other effects of groundwater pumping to a less than significant level. Additionally, the Draft EIS/EIR should study mitigation measures (or project alternatives) that include common-sense approaches such as lower levels of transfers and/or related groundwater pumping.

B. Agricultural and Economic Impacts.

The Executive Summary of the Draft EIS/EIR explains that the proposed transfers are primarily intended to support agriculture within SLDMA boundaries. Ironically however, all of the identified drawbacks of the "no action alternative" in the Draft EIS/EIR—increased groundwater pumping, cropland idling, and land retirement within the SLDMA—could occur within the selling areas if the transfers proceed. These effects range from minor to significant, as explained in Chapter 3.9 of the document.

Despite this, the Draft EIS/EIR does not contain sufficient mitigation measures or other constraints upon the proposed transfers to ensure that the adverse effects of water shortages are not simply transferred from the SLDMA to the selling areas. There is no legal or practical reason why this should be so. For instance, the Draft EIR/EIS could easily contain safeguards that limit transfers to the extent necessary to avoid environmentally and/or economically significant effects on groundwater pumping, cropland idling, and land retirement within the selling areas. Such mitigation measures (or project alternatives) should be included for consideration in a recirculated version of the Draft EIS/EIR. More detailed consideration of the potential for Alternatives 3 and 4 to reduce such effects should also be included in the recirculated document.

The Draft EIS/EIR also takes an inappropriately narrow view of "agricultural impacts." It focuses largely on whether cropland idling and changes in cropping patterns will "substantially decrease" the amount of affected farmland designated Prime Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance, or Unique Farmland during the limited term of the transfer program studied in the Draft EIS/EIR. This impact is deemed less than significant under Alternative 2, primarily because cropland idling will be for relatively short periods of time during the ten-year duration of the studied transfers.

This analytical approach is flawed because the water transfers facilitated by the Draft EIS/EIR will lead to continued demand (post-2024) for additional water transfers to support agricultural, municipal, and industrial uses within the boundaries of the SLDMA and other purchasing entities. For this reason, the ten-year term of the environmental analysis is entirely artificial. It has no connection to real-world demands, which will extend long past 2024, nor does it have any apparent connection to legal or other characteristics of the proposed transfers. A short-term view of the environmental and economic effects of creating a water transfer program is therefore inappropriate because it can be seen with reasonable certainty that, analogous to the growth-inducing effects of urban development projects, the demand for such transfers will continue beyond the limited life of the program. The Draft EIS/EIR should be revised to account for the basic reality that water transfers will lead to (and likely increase the demand for) more water transfers, well beyond the ten-year period of the analysis.

Finally, the potential adverse economic impacts of the proposed transfers are considerable, particularly within Yolo, Colusa, and Glenn Counties. The Draft EIS/EIR notes that, among other things, over 40,000 acres in rice land alone in the Sacramento Region may not be farmed due to the potential water transfers. In those three counties alone, up to 362 jobs may be lost and the projected declines in labor income and economic output are \$11.1 million and \$45.46 million, respectively.

These economic effects (and the related potential for indirect environmental effects) deserve considerably more analysis. To use one example, the potential decline of rice cultivation in the Yolo Bypass due to water transfers, ecosystem restoration, and other projects (which should be included in an analysis of cumulative impacts) could lead to a "tipping point"—meaning that rice cultivation ceases to be commercially viable even on unaffected lands throughout the County—due to a decline in rice volumes, the resulting closure of local rice mills, and the eventual rise of unit processing costs to unacceptable levels. None of this appears to have received meaningful consideration in the Draft EIS/EIR.

C. Impacts on Terrestrial Species, Including Migratory Waterfowl.

The Draft EIS/EIS concludes that potential adverse effects on habitat availability and suitability for terrestrial species due to cropland idling/shifting under Alternatives 2 and 4 would be less than significant. This is simply wrong, particularly (though not only) for species that depend on flooded agricultural fields and associated irrigation waterways. Not only does this analytical shortcoming render the Draft EIS/EIR deficient under the California Environmental Quality Act ("CEQA") and the National Environmental Policy Act ("NEPA"), it also calls into

question whether the proposed transfers meet the requirements of the Central Valley Project Improvement Act of 1992 (which prohibits water transfers will adversely affect water supplies for fish and wildlife) and similar provisions of the California Water Code (e.g., Cal. Water Code §§ 1725 and 1736).

For the giant garter snake, the analysis of these issues in the Draft EIS/EIR is particularly deficient. The analysis at pp. 3-8.68 through 3-8.70 is highly general and simply states the obvious (i.e., that some individual members of the species will be subject to increased predation and other risks due to habitat displacement) before concluding that impacts are unlikely to be significant. The conclusion appears to be nothing more than speculation.

Also, the "environmental commitments" described at p. 2-29 are unlikely to be sufficient to protect giant garter snake populations in Yolo County. The commitments primarily limit restrictions on transfers from fields "abutting or immediately adjacent to" the "land side" of the Toe Drain along Willow Slough and Willow Slough Bypass in Yolo County. (Draft EIS/EIS at p. 2-29.) This very narrow restriction that fails to fully account for the wide distribution of the giant garter snake across parcels not immediately adjacent to the Toe Drain. Accordingly, the Draft EIS/EIR does not sufficiently explain how this restriction supports a conclusion that impacts will be less than significant.

Similarly troubling is the complete absence of any analysis of the potential effects of the proposed water transfers on the Swainson's hawk or migratory waterfowl. Numerous passages in Chapter 3-8 indicate that the authors of the Draft EIS/EIR understand that agricultural fields and natural communities affected by the proposed transfers currently support abundant Swainson's hawk and migratory waterfowl populations. Despite this, however, there is no meaningful analysis of potential impacts on the Swainson's hawk or migratory waterfowl. Effects resulting from the fallowing of fields--and for migratory waterfowl, particularly the loss of up to 40,000 in rice annually--need to be analyzed carefully in the Draft EIS/EIR.

* * *

Overall, as this letter describes, the Draft EIS/EIR needs significant revisions and recirculation to meet the requirements of CEQA and NEPA. The County requests notice of any hearings or other public discussions of the Draft EIS/EIR or the water transfers studied therein, as well as copies of any documents subsequently produced under CEQA or NEPA for the proposed transfers. Such notice is required by CEQA, as the County is a "responsible agency" within the meaning of that statute. As noted above, the County is continuing to review the Draft EIS and may submit further comments in early 2014.

Very truly yours,



Patrick S. Blacklock
Yolo County Administrator

Enclosure

cc: Yolo County Board of Supervisors