

Water panel up, running again

Tulare Co. commission's comeback is linked to San Joaquin River deal.

By Sarah Jimenez / The Fresno Bee

07/23/07 05:19:16

VISALIA -- It's been 15 years since Tulare County had a water commission, and in that time the importance of water issues has only escalated.

Unincorporated communities can't count on continuous, safe drinking water. Nitrate levels in small water systems are above acceptable standards. And farmers worry about water shortages.

But one recent development has magnified the county's water situation: the San Joaquin River settlement.

The settlement reached last year was the result of an 18-year-old lawsuit over restoring water and salmon to the river. The restoration will require water diversion from Friant Dam, which farmers depend on for irrigation supplies.

County leaders believe Tulare County could be the most impacted area. The most vocal concerns come from agriculture interests, but the effects reach beyond farms, experts say.

"Yeah, it's agriculture water, but it's more than that," said Dick Moss, former general manager of the Friant Water Users Authority who has worked on water issues since 1978.

"It's everyone's water. It's going to impact our groundwater."

In the wake of this, the Board of Supervisors has revived its water commission, appointing eight community members to advise them. The Tulare County Association of Governments selected a ninth member, Visalia City Council Member Bob Link.

Perhaps a sign of how serious the county is about water, Supervisor Allen Ishida is heading the commission as the nonvoting chairman. Of the county's 42 commissions, this is the only one headed by a supervisor.

Ishida, the chairman of the Board of Supervisors, has campaigned heavily for more attention on water during his time on the board. Last week, as supervisors finalized formation of the commission, Ishida called it a "serious endeavor" vital to the future of Tulare County and the state.

Fresno and Madera counties have active water committees. However, Kings County's advisory board has not formally operated in several years.

Tulare County's commission brings together an array of water experts, including civil engineers, community activists, farmers and watermasters.

Balancing the multitude of water concerns could be a challenge.

Keith Watkins, board president for the Tulare County Farm Bureau and an at-large commission appointee, said it will be an "interesting group to work with."

Still, he said bringing together a variety of expertise is important if the county is going to develop a regional plan.

"I think we'll be an advocacy group," Watkins said. "Having a common voice between ag, communities and the environment can be a strong rallying point."

Just last week, Senate President Pro Tem Don Perata, D-Oakland, announced a \$5 billion water plan he wants on the 2008 ballot. If approved, money would be handed out to regions based on a formula.

If Tulare County -- and other counties in the Tulare Lake Basin -- can show water impacts beyond farms, state lawmakers may be more sympathetic to needs of the county and Valley, Moss said.

Laurel Firestone, another at-large appointee and co-director/attorney for the nonprofit Community Water Center, said she's "cautiously optimistic" the commission will be a mechanism for change.

"I'm sure there will be disagreements," she said. "But having all those needs laid out in the same place and at least bringing a forum for those voices left out is an opportunity to make sure we're really finding sustainable solutions."

Water entities have a long history of working together, even if they have different specific needs, said Bruce George, general manager of the Kaweah Delta Water Conservation District and watermaster of the Kaweah and St. Johns River Association. George is the District 3 appointee.

"I don't think that when we get to recommendations that it will be about looking out for your own turf -- so to speak," he said. "It will be about bringing sound advice so the county will be better off as a county."

The commission's first order of business is a meeting today where members will look over three proposed projects under Proposition 84 funding. The \$5.4 billion bond was approved by California voters in November to address water quality, flood control and parks.

Tulare County is seeking \$1.5 million to be divided among three studies:

- Evaluating overall water quality in the county.
- Identifying nitrate sources in public water systems.
- Improving drinking water for small communities.

Water problems aren't new for the county, or the state. Documents show the county had a water commission dating back to at least 1978, county spokesman Eric Coyne said. It's not clear why the commission disbanded in 1992.

Moss, vice president of Provost and Pritchard engineering, said three issues have brought water to the forefront of discussion: available funding through state propositions, quality of drinking water and -- perhaps the heavy hitter -- restoration of the San Joaquin River.

Tulare County hasn't faced a loss of water of that magnitude, Moss said. "That's certainly refocused water issues for Tulare County."

Watkins, the Farm Bureau board president, agrees.

"I think that has everyone nervous," he said. "If we don't have those surface supplies, it's going to require more groundwater pumping," he said. "If farms have to pump more groundwater, then it affects communities."

In addition, urban development has never been greater, George said. Growth can't happen if the county lacks quality water.

To address challenges, Firestone said the various water entities need to find ways to help each other and put themselves in line for state and federal funds.

"Tulare County hasn't gotten enough money and enough attention -- especially given the need," she said. "But I also think we need to start creating the solutions ourselves and not wait for someone to come in and save us."

The reporter can be reached at sjimenez@fresnobee.com

More information

Commission members

Members of the Tulare County Water Commission

- Paul Boyer, rural water systems expert at Self-Help Enterprises, District 1 appointee.
- Dale Brogan, Delano-Earlimart Irrigation District, District 2 appointee.
- Bruce George, Kaweah Delta Water Conservation District, District 3 appointee.
- Chris Kapheim, Alta Irrigation District, District 4 appointee.
- Richard Schafer, Tule River Association watermaster, District 5 appointee.
- Dennis Keller, consulting engineer, at-large appointee.
- Laurel Firestone, Community Water Center, at-large appointee.

- Keith Watkins, Tulare County Farm Bureau board president, at-large appointee.
 - Bob Link, Visalia City Council member, Tulare County Association of Governments representative.
-