Local water guys eyeing Kings River flood water

Lois Henry

You've got to hand it to our local ag water guys.

As increasing regulations and drought have pinched the supply from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, Kern's water folks have gotten pretty darn creative.

One district recently bought the old Onyx Ranch above Lake Isabella in hopes of bringing water from the south fork of the Kern River to crops in the valley. Other districts are looking at buying islands in the delta to use as private reservoirs.

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And now the Semitropic Water Storage District is looking at two projects using the ancient Tulare Lake bed to capture flood waters from the Kings ftiver as well as, eventually, the delta.

Before getting into the details of the projects, I have to pause and wonder whether Semitropic has a prayer of pulling this off.

Yes, it has the blessing of a major Tulare Lake landowner, Sandridge Partners, principally owned by John Vidovich, who's also a major landowner here and stands to benefit by this water coming to Kern.

And, yes, this is water that otherwise would have left the basin.

Politically, though, it could be a fight.

Interestingly, I was contacted Friday evening by a conglomeration of groups — North Delta Cares, Citizens Water Plan and San Joaquin Leadership Forum — that favor a delta-to-Tulare Lake storage plan as opposed to the governor's twin tunnels. I was told by the groups' spokesman Steve Haze that they are well aware of Semitropic's plans and feel they are on a separate, but parallel, track. He said the groups aren't opposed to Semitropic's projects as long they provide environmental and socio-economic benefits.

"Especially if they plan to use Prop. 1 money," Haze said. And they do.

Given the various players and political hurdles, it should be no surprise that Semitropic has had former state Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, on the payroll for the better part of a year as a consultant working "indirectly" on these projects. (Still, I was kinda surprised.)

In any event, I can only imagine the uproar if a Southern California water district waltzed into Kern and tried to make off with Kern River flood water.



In fact, Bakersfield is hotly objecting to a proposal by Rosedale-Rio Bravo Water Storage District to increase a banking project it has had with the Irvine Ranch Water District since 2008 for fear it could result in

Please see HENRY / A9

HENRY

CONTINUED FROM A7

Kern River flood water leaving the basin.

So, I can't help but see a major fight over Semitropic's plans for Kings River flood water. Beyond that, Semitropic is hoping for a large amount of public money to help with its second project and that looks even trickier.

Anyhow, here's how the projects would work.

The first, a pilot project, is relatively simple.

The pilot project would siphon flood water out of a canal and into the California Aqueduct, where it would move south to be stored in Semitropic's groundwater bank. That project would be capable of moving 140,000 acre feet of water a day, according to Semitropic General Manager Jason Gianquinto.

Kings River flood water has historically been moved up to the delta via a facility known as the Eastern Bypass. But massive groundwater pumping caused the land beneath the Bypass to sink and no one is sure if it's still functional.

Semitropic already has the pipe and pumps plus buy-in from the landowner, Vidovich. It just needs permission from the Department of Water Resources (DWR) to punch into the aqueduct.

Cost would be between $1.5 million and $2.5 million.

Semitropic hopes to break ground on the pilot project in January and get it operational by February, Gianquinto said, just in time for El Niño. Semitropic has filed a notice of exemption to CEQA (California Environmental Quality Act) to move the project more quickly.

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That may be optimistic considering DWR has yet to see an actual proposal, according to Ted Thomas, spokesman for DWR.

"DWR was given a draft one- or two-paragraph project description by (Semitropic's) consultant a couple of weeks ago," Thomas wrote in an email. "That's all we know about the proposal at this time."

That's because Semitropic has to work through the Kern County Water Agency to make a formal application to DWR. And to do that, it has to get the OK from the Tulare Lake Basin Water Storage District, which encompasses the land on which Semitropic is making its plans.

That has gone slowly.

"My board hasn't taken a position on it," was all General Manager Mark Gilkey would say.

Meanwhile, the Kings River Watermaster hadn't heard one word about the project until I called. He was keenly interested to learn more.

"We plan to meet with the Kings River group, but we have to get through the Tulare Basin people first," explained Gianquinto. "A lot of pieces still have to line up."

OK, then.

So, on to the next part of Semitropic's plans.

The second project is much, much bigger and estimated to cost between $350 million and $500 million, according to Gianquinto. Semitropic is hoping to get half that money from Proposition 1 funding. More on that in a sec.

"It's very big picture," he said. "And would provide the only true south-of-delta storage."

The second project would involve building large reservoirs, or "cells," in the Tulare Lake bed to park "excess" water from the delta in the short term and then ship that water to Semitropic to store underground for long-term use. Semitropic is still in the very early stages of this project and expects to hire its CEQA consultant in the next few weeks.

The cells would be built on 40,000 acres of land and would involve constructing levees between 5 and 8 feet high that could hold up to 200,000 acre feet of water. To put that in perspective, Lake Isabella is now allowed to hold a maximum 360,000 acre feet of water.

The cells could take flood water from the Kings River, Gianquinto said, but the idea is to take excess water flows from the delta when needed.

That's where the project gets into Prop. 1 money.

Prop. 1 was passed by voters last year and has about $3 billion designated to pay for water storage in California.

But there are strings. Lots of strings.

First, any project funded by Prop. 1 money has to be for the "public good." Specific guidelines have yet to be issued defining public good but some of the parameters require projects to improve: Ecosystems in the delta; water quality; flood control; emergency response; and/or recreation.

Fifty percent of any money awarded has to be spent on delta ecosystems. Plus winning projects have to be shown to be cost-effective. (Lotta strings.)

I asked Gianquinto how Semitropic's Tulare Lake bed cell project fits into those criteria.

It creates more storage, obviously, it helps with flood control, the cells could be used for recreation and it would help increase natural flows in the delta during high water years, he said.

"It would allow more water to move through the state system, which allows more flexibility," Gianquinto said.

I'm not so sure delta advocates would see it like that, but I'll leave that for the inevitable CEQA fight.

I was more interested in the "public good" aspect of this proposal.

Semitropic has about 400 landowners who, clearly, would find the "good" in this project.

But what about "THE PUBLIC"?

Gianquinto pointed to the flood control aspect. It's true, the project would help control floodwater.

Course, when the Kings River floods, that water goes straight to its old haunt, the Tulare Lake bed, which is intensively farmed almost exclusively by the J.G. Boswell company. So, flood control would mostly benefit one company.

All of which prompted me to ask whether Semitropic would go forward with its big cell project even without Prop. 1 money.

Though he insisted the district has a good shot at that money, Gianquinto said that, yes, Semitropic could go it alone, albeit with a scaled-back version.

As I said, you have to hand it to Kern's water guys for creativity.

We'll just have to see if any of it morphs into reality.

Opinions expressed in this column are those of Lois Henry. Her column runs Wednesdays and Sundays. Comment at http://www.bakersfield.com, call her at 395-7373 or email lhenry@bakersfield.com.