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News

Chair discusses Delta Plan

By [Dawn Hodson](#) [From page A1](#) | August 04, 2017



Randy Fiorini, Chair of the Delta Stewardship Council, spoke on Wednesday regarding statewide and regional water issues as a guest of the Mountain Counties Water Resources Association. Democrat photo by Dawn Hodson

Discussing regional and statewide water issues on Wednesday was Randy Fiorini, chair of the Delta Stewardship Council, who gave his presentation at the request of the Mountain Counties Water Resources Association.

Fiorini is the managing partner of the Fiorini Ranch in Delhi.

He previously served on the board of directors of the Turlock Irrigation District, was president of the Association of California Water Agencies, president of the California Farm Water Coalition Board of Directors and chairman of the California Cling Peach Board, among other positions.

He has served on the Delta Stewardship Council since it was formed in 2010.

Recalling the history of water in California, Fiorini noted that conflict over its use has driven and continues to drive change in how water is derived and employed.

The discovery of gold in California was the beginning of water development in the state. But conflicts over mining claims and water claims led to the development of riparian rights. There was also recognition of the potential agricultural value of the Delta because at the time the Delta was an inland estuary and now is a highly channelized region of farmland.

By 1855 and the subsequent development of hydraulic mining, there was widespread environmental damage as tons and tons of tailings were washed into the rivers. That in turn led to the transition from mining to agriculture in the state as people looked at another way to make a living.

Later, as discoveries leading to the development of hydroelectric power arrived and the Irrigation Act was passed in California, dams were built in places like Turlock and Hetch Hetchy to exploit the flow of water. The legislation and development of hydroelectric power transformed the state, according to Fiorini.

In 1914 conflicts over water led to the development of the current water rights system with water holders having pre and post 1914 rights. Pre 1914 rights are the most senior water rights in the state.

Later federal and state projects were developed and area of origin rights were established.

The Central Valley Project, a federally funded project managed by the Bureau of Reclamation, followed. Built in the 1930s, it included several dams including Shasta and ending with the New Melones.

In 1960 the State Water Project was undertaken, which resulted in the building of 21 dams and more than 700 miles of canals, pipelines and tunnels.

However in the late 1960s and 70s the state transitioned to an environmental era as federal and state legislation was passed putting in place the EPA, Endangered Species Act, Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, Marine Mammal Protection Act and CEQA.

Since then, Fiorini said projects have primarily been locally driven and built with an additional 4 million acre-feet of water storage added.

More recently residents have been reminded they live in a state that goes through periods of wet and dry as they experienced the drought years of 1986 through 1992. Attention shifted from developing water supplies to what to do about the Delta, which had become the hub or the “switchyard” for state and federal projects and conflicts about water operations and the environment, especially some key species of fish.

That in turn resulted in the Delta Reform Act being passed along with the formation of the Delta Stewardship Council.

Fiorini said over a three-year period staff at the council worked on developing a comprehensive, long-term management plan for the Delta that satisfies two coequal goals: to provide California with a more reliable supply of water and to protect, restore and enhance the Delta ecosystem.

However, within 30 days of adopting the plan, 27 entities sued the council and it's now in the hands of the courts.

But he said the lawsuits haven't hindered their ability to implement the recommendations in the plan, which includes 73 recommendations, 14 regulatory policies and almost 100 performance measures.

Elements of the plan require more conservation and efficient uses of water, more storage facilities, improved water conveyance and levees and the need to develop a food web and rearing habitat for fish.

Another topic Fiorini addressed was groundwater restoration. Various contaminants have surfaced in the water table, especially in the Central Valley, that constitute a health risk to residents. Overdrafting of water, especially during the drought, has also caused the land to subside over 30 feet in some locations.

In 2014 the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA) was passed. The legislation established a framework for local groundwater management and requires groundwater-dependent regions to halt overdrafting and bring basins into balanced levels of pumping and recharge. However, the question remains of how to fund the act.

Currently the most controversial project the state is proposing is the Delta Tunnels or what is called the California Water Fix.

Fiorini said the council promotes dual conveyance and agrees that underground conveyance is the way to do it as being the least disruptive to the Delta. At the same time he acknowledged there is distrust of how the Delta will be protected in times of drought if the tunnels are built.

During the question-and-answer session that followed, Fiorini said there is a need for a comprehensive approach to ensuring the health of the watershed. There is also a need for new investment in forestry management and storage facilities and in eliminating pesticides from finding their way into streams and rivers.

Saying the state is at a tipping point in water policy, Fiorini was asked to predict what will happen in the next five years. He said he believes 4 to 5 new reservoirs will be undertaken to increase storage; judges and attorneys will be kept busy on water related issues; and SGMA will drive water management.

Noting how difficult addressing all the issues surrounding the Delta are in the state, he concluded his presentation by saying if he had a bumper sticker on his car, it would read: "The Delta. It's complicated."