

Local Dam May Change Hands, Save Money

San Luis Reservoir renovations designed to fix problems, protect the environment

Daniel Zarchy
National News Reporter

The raging water wars in California may be taking a turn toward armistice, as the federal and state governments are coming together to work on expanding water resources to local citizens.

The United States Bureau of Reclamation (USBR), a government agency formed in 1902 to provide water services to the 17 western-most states, has a proposal that could end amiably on all sides: for the farmers, for the taxpayers, and for the environment.

The San Luis Reservoir, a water-storage facility about 55 miles east of Santa Cruz, has been the site of much debate since local farmers began experiencing a problem with the clay in the area to the point that they required serious and expensive procedures to correct these drainage issues. A local court ruled five years ago that the USBR, which built the system in the 1960s, was responsible for paying for these upgrades. A new proposal, currently under review by the California State Legislature, seeks to address these issues.

Jeff McCracken, a spokesperson for the USBR, explained that the proposal involves the federal government transferring ownership of the reservoir to local water districts and the state of California.

In exchange, the local organizations would be responsible for solving the drainage system for themselves, and would release 400,000 acre-feet of water for consumption outside of their organizations.

According to McCracken, the federal government would forgive a \$490 million debt owed by local farmers to help pay for the drainage solutions, but that privatizing this work would save taxpayers the \$2.5 billion it would take if the USBR were to implement the drainage themselves.

“Our [local] annual budget for our region is \$165 million.

The budget for the entire Bureau of Reclamation is \$900 million, so this fix would cost basically the whole budget over a three-year period [if the USBR were to pay],” McCracken said. He also emphasized the benefits of the farmers releasing so much water for public consumption.

“In the years that we have the full 400,000 [acre-feet], we could put that to environmental needs,” McCracken said. “That’s like a new pot of water that we have.”

Brent Haddad, associate professor of environmental science at UC Santa Cruz,

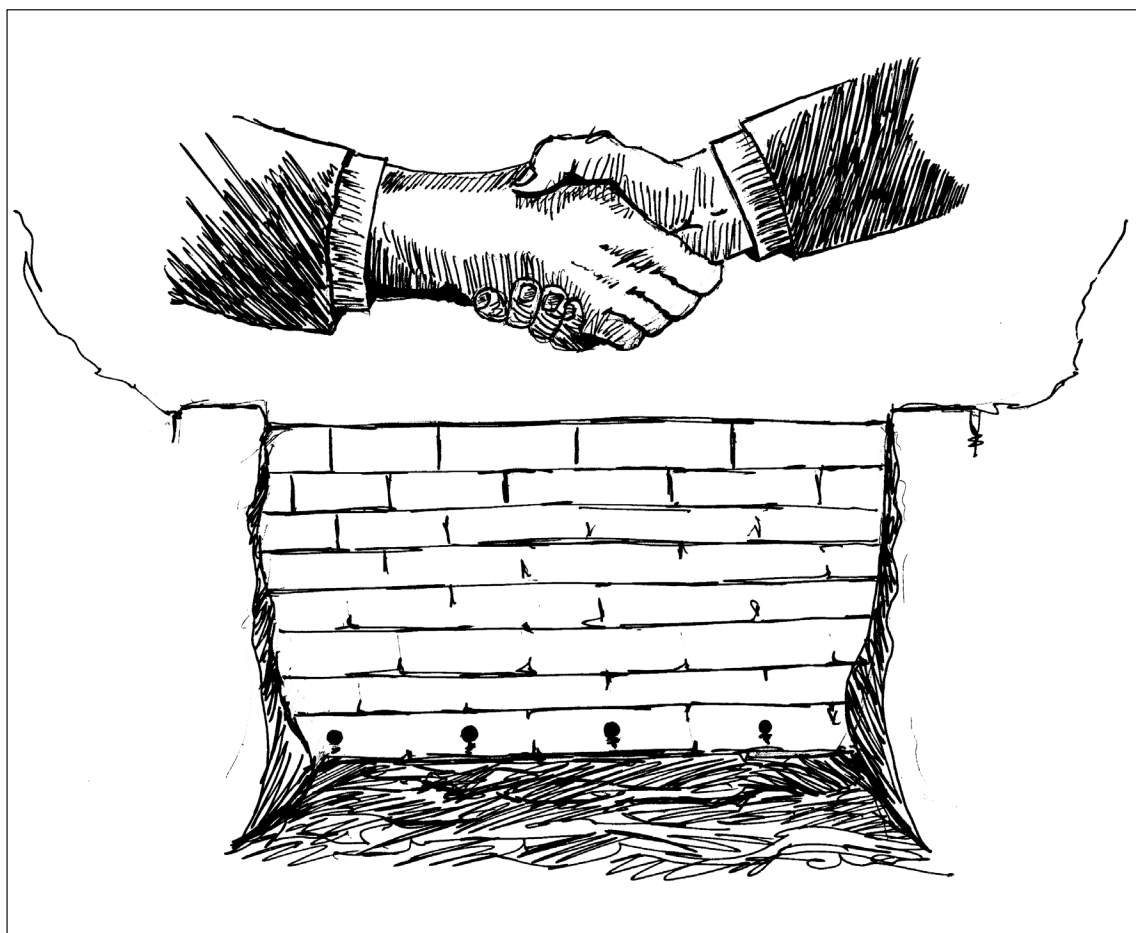
be environmentally hazardous, and “since water is needed evenly throughout the year, the more south-of-delta water we can get, the easier it is to protect the delta.”

Ted Thomas, chief of information services for the California Department of Water Resources (DWR), explained that the USBR had been briefing the state legislature, that a settlement may come in the near future, and that “[the DWR] favors a settlement so long as it does not adversely affect water operations in the state water project.”

However, according to

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Jeff McCracken,
Spokesperson for the USBR



Dylan Murphy | CHP

explained that the San Luis Reservoir holds a special significance in the California water climate.

“The San Luis Reservoir is one of the few spots that’s south of the Bay Delta system where you can store water, and one of the big challenges with our water system is getting it through the delta,” said Haddad, who specializes in urban and regional water policy. Typically, moving water through the delta area can

McCracken, it is unlikely any of this water will find its way to Santa Cruz.

“We deliver water to basically the Santa Clara water district. That’s as far west as we go.” McCracken said. “The federal government doesn’t have any way to get water to Santa Cruz.”

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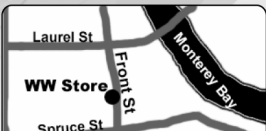
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