

Editorial: Little fish's disappearance is a big problem

Posted: 04/22/15, 9:28 PM PDT

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The little delta smelt is nearly extinct. You can almost hear the celebrations in the San Joaquin Valley from here.

Not so fast though.

As the drought worsens, the people vs. fish argument heats up south of the delta, whipped up by pandering valley politicians who say people shouldn't suffer because of a little fish.

In the midst of this, the news about the delta smelt couldn't have come at a more unfortunate time.

The state Department of Fish and Wildlife throws out nets in the delta in an attempt to count the endangered smelt, which are the size of a child's pinkie. There weren't many to count in the monthly trawling survey earlier this month.

The final tally: one.

Yes, one little fish.

As the San Jose Mercury News noted last week, the delta smelt were once the most plentiful fish in the delta. Now they are close to extinction in the wild, and are only thriving in hatcheries.

Good riddance, say farmers in the San Joaquin Valley.

The Farm Press Blog scoffs that farmers are suffering "based on the science of four buckets of minnows." An attorney for the California Farm Bureau Federation laments that 20 million Californians have an unreliable water supply because of "one small little population of fish."

Congressman Tom McClintock, a Southern Californian who once represented southern Butte County and now represents a district that stretches into the San Joaquin Valley, has never been a fan of fish or ecosystems. He'd still like to see Auburn Dam get built and just last month introduced in Congress the Save Our Water Act, which we believe has absolutely no chance of getting by the president or the courts. McClintock said the bill's aim was to "stop the appalling practice of sacrificing tens of thousands of acre-feet of water for the comfort of fish when the human population is in immense peril."

We're sure some of his valley constituents eat up that hyperbole. To many of them, especially during the drought, the Sacramento River is merely a canal that delivers north state water to them.

It's not the lifeblood of a region. It's not a river system that supplies recreation, aquifer recharge and is teeming with fish, deer, turkeys, waterfowl and other riparian wonders.

The delta is the same way. It's a place, not a thing.

Though some San Joaquin farmers lament the fact that water flows into the Pacific Ocean, the fact remains that the San Joaquin's hope for a reliable water supply cannot include whatever they want from the delta.

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Environmental laws and judges keep them from sucking the delta dry and ruining it like the San Joaquin River was ruined. Thank goodness.

Even if the delta smelt go extinct, that's not the end of their worries. The smelt are disappearing because the delta is in peril. If the delta smelt go, other species will be next. It's not just about one little, unglamorous fish. The problem of sucking too much water out of the Sacramento River and the delta won't disappear just because the delta smelt do.