

Down the drain

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Reclamation engineers and members of Congress knew 50 years ago, when they decided to bring clear mountain waters hundreds of miles to the San Joaquin Valley for crop irrigation, that the valley's soils would brew an environmental problem. Their solution was to send the problem downstream. The cost of that eyes-wide-shut mistake is finally coming due, to the tune of at least \$900 million.

The arable soil on thousands of acres of farmland in the Westlands Water District, in Fresno and Kings counties, sits atop an impermeable layer of clay. Blocked from draining downward, the irrigation water sat there, dissolving selenium and other impurities in the soil. The polluted brew collected at root level and killed crops, so engineers put in tiled drains.

The project collected selenium-tainted water from the farms and sent it 82 miles north via the San Luis Drain to Kesterson Reservoir, a national wildlife refuge. Ultimately, the drain was to be extended to the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta south and west of Sacramento, but it stopped at Kesterson because of cost and environmental concerns.

In 1983, wildlife officials began finding deformed bird embryos and dead birds at Kesterson, victims of selenium poisoning. The refuge was closed and the birds frightened away from its waters. Filtered and diluted runoff was redistributed into streams feeding the San Joaquin River. In the 1990s, landowners sued the federal government, claiming damage to their property values and demanding completion of the promised drain to the delta. Given that the delta is where giant pumps collect fresh water and send it south to San Joaquin Valley farms and to millions of water users throughout California, the idea was no better than when it was first considered.

A federal appeals court sided with the farmers in 2000 but gave the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation options: 1) Finish the drain, a nonstarter. 2) Send the polluted water to the Pacific Ocean by pipeline, also unacceptable. 3) Buy up some of the irrigated land and turn it into evaporation ponds for the tainted water, keeping it in one place.

No. 3, at a cost of about \$900 million, is the only environmentally acceptable one of the options. An even cleaner, though more costly, solution would be for the federal government to buy up all 300,000 acres of poorly drained land and take them out of irrigated use, also freeing new water for thirsty California.