



MAN-MADE DROUGHT

A guide to California's water wars.

By Rep. Devin Nunes

In the summer of 2002, shortly before I was elected to Congress, I sat through an eye-opening meeting with representatives from the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and several local environmental activist groups. Hoping to convince me to support various water restrictions, they argued that San Joaquin Valley farmers should stop growing alfalfa and cotton in order to save water—though they allowed that the planting of high-value crops such as almonds could continue.

Then, as our discussion turned to the groups' overall vision for the San Joaquin Valley, they told me something astonishing. Their goal was to remove 1.3 million acres of farmland from production. They showed me maps that laid out their whole plan: From Merced all the way down to Bakersfield, and on the entire west side of the valley as well as part of the east side, productive agriculture would end and the land would return to some ideal state of nature. I was stunned by

the vicious audacity of their goal—and I quickly learned how dedicated they were to achieving it.

How to Steal Water and Get Away With It

For decades, extreme environmentalists have pursued this goal in California with relentless determination. The method they have used to depopulate the targeted land—water deprivation—has been ruthless and effective.

Much of the media and many politicians blame the San Joaquin Valley's water shortage on drought, but that is merely an aggravating factor. From my experience representing California's agricultural heartland, I know that our water crisis is not an unfortunate natural occurrence; it is the intended result of a long-term campaign waged by radical environmentalists who resorted to political pressure as well as profuse lawsuits.

Working in cooperation with sympathetic judges and friendly federal and state offi-

cials, environmental groups have gone to extreme lengths to deprive the San Joaquin Valley, the heart of much of U.S. agricultural production, of much-needed water. Consider the following actions they took.

The Central Valley Project Improvement Act: Backed by the NRDC, Sierra Club, and other extreme environmental groups, large Democratic majorities in Congress passed the CVPIA in 1992 after attaching it to a must-pass public lands bill. It stipulated that 800,000 acre-feet of water—or 260 billion gallons—on the valley's west side had to be diverted annually to environmental causes, with an additional 400,000 acre-feet later being diverted annually to wildlife refuges.

Smelt and salmon biological opinions: Lawsuits filed by the NRDC and similar organizations forced the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service to issue, respectively, biological opinions on smelt (in 2008) and on salmon (in 2009). These opinions virtually ended operation of the Jones and Banks pumping plants—the two major pumping stations that move San Joaquin River Delta water—and resulted in massive diversions of water for environmental purposes.



Backed by California Congressmen David Valadao, Kevin McCarthy and Devin Nunes, House Speaker John Boehner addresses the water crisis in 2014 at a dried-up farm in Bakersfield. BELOW: Sitting behind smelt that he later submitted into evidence, Rep. Nunes testifies at a 2009 congressional hearing on water.

natural habitat. Yet the entire Delta system is not natural at all. It's a man-made network of islands that functions only thanks to upstream water-storage projects. In fact, without man-made storage projects, canals and dams, in dry years such as this the rivers would quickly run dry, meaning there would be no water and no fish.

A Three-Step Solution

The radicals have pursued their plan methodically and successfully; between the CVPIA, biological opinions, and the San Joaquin River Settlement, around a million acres of farmland have been idled. What's left of the water supply is inadequate for sustaining valley farming communities. South of the Delta, we now face an annual water-supply deficit of approximately 2.5 million acre-feet, or 815 billion gallons.

In fact, with the state groundwater regulations announced last year, the radicals are poised to achieve their goal. The depletion of groundwater is a direct effect—and, indeed, was an intended result—of the radicals' assault on our surface water. (After all, if farmers, churches, schools and communities can't get surface water, they'll predictably resort to groundwater.) But the radicals have perversely cited the groundwater depletion they themselves engineered to justify regulating the groundwater supply. This is the final step in their program, since many farmers will not be able to keep growing food if they continue to receive zero water allocations and are restricted from tapping enough groundwater.

The valley cannot endure this situation much longer, but the good news is that it's

not too late to save our communities. Led by the valley's Republican delegation, the U.S. House of Representatives has passed legislation twice that would bring a long-term end to the water crisis. The solution comprises these three simple measures:

- Return Delta pumping to normal operations at federal and state pumps. Because normal pumping levels are already paid for, this measure would cost taxpayers zero dollars.

- Fix the San Joaquin River Settlement. Instead of continuing to spend hundreds of millions of dollars on an unworkable scheme to recreate salmon runs, we should turn the San Joaquin River into a year-round flowing river with recirculated water. This approach would be good for the warm-water fish habitat and for recreation, and it would save taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars that will otherwise go down the salmon-run rat hole.

- Expedite and approve construction of major new water projects. This should include building the Temperance Flat Dam along the San Joaquin River, raising Shasta Dam to increase its reservoir capacity, expanding the San Luis Reservoir, and approving construction of the Sites Reservoir in the Sacramento Valley. Because water users themselves should rightfully pay for these projects, they would cost federal taxpayers zero dollars.

These measures would not only end the

water crisis, they would also improve the environment for fish and wildlife—all while saving taxpayer dollars.

The Price of Inaction

I warned of the likely outcome of the radicals' campaign in my testimony to a House committee back in 2009: "Failure to act, and it's over. You will witness the collapse of modern civilization in the San Joaquin Valley."

That is indeed the grim future facing the valley if we don't change our present trajectory. The solution passed twice by the U.S. House, however, was blocked by Senate Democrats, who were supported by the administration of Gov. Brown as well as the Obama administration. These Democrats need to begin speaking frankly and honestly with San Joaquin Valley communities and more broadly with Californians about the effects of idling 1.3 million acres of farmland. This will ruin not only valley farming operations, but will wipe out entire swathes of associated local businesses and industries.

The damage is not limited to the San



Joaquin Valley. Although residents of coastal areas such as Los Angeles, the Bay Area, and San Diego have been led to believe they are being subject to water restrictions due to the drought, that's not actually true. As in the valley, these areas and

many others ultimately depend on the Delta pumps for their water supply. If the pumps had been functioning normally for the past decade, none of these cities would be undergoing a water crisis today.

And it's a safe bet that Brown's mandatory water reductions will not alleviate the crisis, leading to a drastic increase in restrictions in the not-too-distant future. Watering your lawn, washing your car, and countless other everyday activities will be banned up and down California. In their mania to attack Central Valley farming, the radicals are inadvertently running the entire state out of water. ■

Devin Nunes is chairman of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. He represents California's 22nd congressional district. NOTE: This is an abridged version of an article originally appearing in Investor's Business Daily on June 12, 2015.