

Farmers skeptical of Delta tunnel plan

By Norimitsu Onishi, New York Times

COURTLAND – On the last Sunday of July, this small town in the Sacramento River’s Delta takes a pause from the peak of the pear harvest season by holding its annual pear fair. A pear run, a pear parade, a pear pie eating contest and a pear fair queen are as much a part of life’s rhythm here as the pruning, picking and packing of pears.

More than 1,000 miles of rivers and sloughs lace the 500,000-acre Delta, where reclaimed islands are ringed by aging levees. [More Photos »](#)

But not far from the booths offering baskets of the fruit, and pear drinks and pear sausage, there were hints this summer that something was ruffling Courtland. At the same booth where a handwritten sign advertised “Pear oatmeal cookies, 2 for \$3,” there were pointed political messages like this one: “Build the tunnel. Kill the Delta.”

Just a few days earlier, state and federal officials announced plans to build twin 35-mile tunnels that would tap water from the Sacramento River at intake stations here. Like highways with no exits, the \$14 billion giant pipelines would run under the Delta in a straight line and deliver the water to aqueducts that feed water to large corporate farms and densely populated regions in Central and Southern California.

Supporters say the pipelines will improve the environment of an increasingly fragile Delta by replacing the pumps that now suck water directly from the southern Delta. More than anything else, backers – led by Gov. Jerry Brown, who failed in his bid to build a similar project in his first term as governor three decades ago – say the tunnels will secure a

supply of water to California's most economically vital areas.

But opponents, including elected officials and farmers from this area, say the tunnels will reduce the amount of fresh water in the Delta and cause irreparable damage to fish and farmland by raising the level of salt water. Much of the Delta is classified as prime farmland and produced about \$800 million in agricultural products in 2009, but the output is dwarfed by counties to the south, whose agricultural production totaled about \$25 billion.

More than 1,000 miles of rivers and sloughs lace the 500,000-acre Delta, where 57 major reclaimed islands are ringed by more than 1,100 miles of aging levees. Here in the upper Delta, the least urbanized area of the region, small towns invariably described as sleepy dot winding levee roads. There are family-owned general stores and no chain stores. Old Victorian houses belonging to farm owners can be seen from the levees, as well as encampments for the migrant workers during harvest. Vestiges of ethnic groups that built the levees or farmed the Delta can be found in this area's fading Chinatowns and Japantowns, reinforcing the impression of an earlier time.

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