

California water managers receive failing grade

By Damon Arthur, Record Searchlight

State and federal agencies in charge of managing California's floodwaters and ecosystems received failing grades Wednesday night.

And the agencies in charge of planning and oversight of the state's water and natural resources also got a failing grade from Ellen Hanak, an economist and senior policy fellow at the Public Policy Institute of California.

Hanak was one of three guest speakers at a California Water Series forum in Redding sponsored by several North State water agencies, the city of Redding, Shasta County and CH2M Hill of Redding.

Holly Dawley, an engineer and Tehama County rancher, talked about the history of California water. And Brian Person, area manager for the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, talked about the proposal to raise the height of Shasta Dam.

Hanak was asked to talk about the economics of California water and the stressors on the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.

The various state and local agencies are doing an "OK" job of managing the infrastructure of the state's wastewater and its water supply, Hanak said. But the infrastructure management of flood control and ecosystems, as well as the oversight and planning of it all is inadequate, she said.

At the same time, local, state and federal agencies are spending \$22 billion a year on water supply, \$10 billion annually on wastewater, \$1.7 billion of flood control, \$500

million on ecosystem management and \$100 million on planning and oversight.

Hanak pointed out that water use for agriculture and residential and urban use has been going down since the late 1980s. But the demand for water to preserve or restore wildlife habitat continues to increase, she said.

“The demand for environmental water has risen, for sure,” Hanak said.

Even while demand for ecosystem water goes up, the condition of the ecosystem continues to deteriorate, she said.

She pointed out the number of fish species listed as either threatened or endangered has risen from 14 to 31 from 1989 to 2010. During the same period, the number of fish species given a “special concern” status because of dwindling numbers has risen from 50 to 69, she said.

Fish are an indicator of the overall health of the state’s environment, she said.

Environmental management in the state is too piecemeal with too many agencies going in different directions, she said.

“This is a recipe for conflict,” Hanak said.

Meanwhile, even with people using less water, it won’t be long before the demand for water exceeds the state’s ability to store it, Dawley said.

Much of the state’s water is either stored in reservoirs or in winter snowpack. But with demands on water and reduced snowpack due to climate change, Dawley said that “not long from now” the state will have an annual water storage deficit of about 5 million acre-feet, which is slightly more than Lake Shasta can hold.

“We have a system that is incredibly overtaxed,” Dawley said.