

Dams may be answer to future droughts

By Carolyn Lochhead, San Francisco Chronicle

Driven by drought, California stands ready to build a water system for the 21st century. Ideas are flowing: conservation, recycling, desalination, aquifer recharge, floodplain restoration, storm water capture.

But the biggest, most expensive, most popular item of all is the foundation of the 20th century water system – dams. Even if El Niño rains bring a bounty of water to the state this winter, the momentum for dam building is unlikely to fade.

Farmers stand to benefit. So do many urban users. The losers would be people like Anita Lodge.

Lodge, 58, clings to the last remnant of a Gold Rush homestead deep in the San Joaquin River Gorge 33 miles north of Fresno, where her ancestors mined ore by wheelbarrow and her mother hung laundry on the willows. Now the 7-acre spread is surrounded by a federal preserve alive with bears and bobcats, herons and eagles, and in spring, a profusion of wildflowers.

Behind a bend downstream lies a linchpin of California's water system: Friant Dam, snaring the river on its path from the Sierra foothills to Fresno and the San Joaquin Valley. Completed in 1942, Friant can hold 520,500 acre-feet of water for farmers and cities in the southern San Joaquin Valley. That's almost twice what the 2.6 million customers of the Hetch Hetchy system used in a year, even before drought-prompted conservation measures kicked in.

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