

Calif. water supply pits farmers against fish

By Robin Abcarian, Los Angeles Times

The offer was too tempting to refuse: Westlands Water District, the ethically challenged agency that often finds itself in the news for all the wrong reasons, invited me on an aerial tour of its watershed.

From high above, I would be able to see the public works projects that have allowed the San Joaquin Valley to bloom, cities to explode and the natural environment to implode.

As someone who spends every flight between Los Angeles and Northern California with her nose pressed against the window, checking out reservoir levels, snow lines and lately, plumes of wildfire smoke, how could I say no? The engineering of water is the ultimate California story.

Soon, we were skirting the western edge of the Sierra Nevada, Yosemite's granite peaks visible in the distance. Suddenly we were over Friant Dam, one of dozens of early- to mid-20th century federal dams, canals and reservoirs designed to transport Northern California's abundant water to the dry but fertile San Joaquin Valley.

Friant harnessed the flow of the San Joaquin River, which was great for farmers. But it was a disaster for the river, and its Chinook salmon, which will probably never recover.

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