

Opinion: How much can Calif. ask of its rivers?

By Joe Mathews

California is finally embracing its rivers. It may be a choking embrace.

We Californians have long celebrated our coastal splendor and beautiful mountains. But our rivers were seen as mere plumbing for our hydration convenience.



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Now California's communities, seeking space for environmental restoration and recreation (and some desperately needed housing), are treating rivers and riverfronts as new frontiers, and are busily reconsidering how these bodies of water might better connect people and places.

A state bond passed in 2014 offers billions for water-related projects, and the epic drought is inspiring imaginative thinking about our waterways.

But the new thinking is also opening up broad new conflicts. So many California places now are making so many plans for so many rivers that we may have to ask just how much change our rivers can handle.

Some of these conflicts are bigger, updated versions of older battles. The so-called California Water Fix—Gov. Jerry Brown's

plan to build two tunnels under the Bay Delta—is really just another chapter in a decadeslong battle over how the state manages its longest and most important river, the 445-mile Sacramento. The tunnels would reroute water from the Sacramento in the name of creating a more predictable water supply for Southern California.

The newer—and, potentially, nastier fight—involves the river that, with the Sacramento, forms the Delta: the overtaxed and often dry San Joaquin. State plans to restore fish species by leaving more water in the San Joaquin and its vital tributaries, the Merced, Tuolumne and Stanislaus, present the hottest and most representative battle in this new era of river appreciation.

The river and its tributaries are part of the landscape of Yosemite and Kings Canyon National Parks, support abundant wildlife, supply some of the world's most productive agriculture, power 4 million homes, provide recreation, and help deliver drinking water to 25 million Californians.

But the state wants the San Joaquin to do even more for fish species. And those who currently rely on the river say that is too much to ask. San Francisco officials argue that the state plan to leave more water in the river could force their city to ration water. San Joaquin Valley officials have all but declared war on the state proposal, arguing that it underestimates the consequences of cutting water to existing users.

“With substantially less water, jobs will disappear, land values will fall and less will be collected in taxes,” wrote the Modesto Bee’s Mike Dunbar early this year in a withering critique of the state’s intentions. “A congressional report already calls us the Appalachia of the West; with less water, we could be the Sahara.”

Such fighting over water in California, while hard, can be

easier than making peace. Back in 2010, stakeholders in the far north of California (and southern Oregon) negotiated agreements to restore the Klamath River basin by sharing water and removing some dams. But the deal required the agreement of Congress, which failed to act, forcing players to try to move forward themselves with certain aspects of the agreements.

In Los Angeles, a complicated debate has erupted over competing plans to restore the L.A. River, the famous concrete flood control channel. Many Angelenos see a beautified, renewed river as the spine of nothing less than a new L.A. with new open space, denser housing, and more amenities for pedestrians, bicyclists and, on the river, boaters. But there are growing clashes between the river's elite and grassroots champions over details and control.

Rivers are also a big part of the conversation elsewhere in urban Southern California. Ventura County's tight development restrictions have allowed for restoration of the Santa Clara River, the closest thing Southern California has to a wild river. The 96-mile Santa Ana River, which runs from near Big Bear all the way to Huntington Beach, is a hot topic in three counties—Riverside, San Bernardino and Orange—inspiring plans for parks, bike and equestrian trails and riverfront economic development. Further south, San Diego is planning a parkway along the length of the San Diego River.

That I've gotten this far without mentioning perhaps the most endangered river in America—the Colorado—is testament to just how river-crazy we've become. Drought, climate change and the demands of agriculture and western cities are crushing the Colorado. And Mexico is demanding the river not dry up before it reaches the Gulf of California.

All California's river dreams and duels could be roiled by the currents of the Potomac. Among his bizarre campaign pronouncements, President-elect Donald Trump denied that California is in a drought, while promising farmers quantities

of water that defy nature's laws.

I suppose we'll have to cross that river when we come to it.

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