

Saving the Tuolumne River

An environmental group convinces San Francisco to stop its water grab. But not everyone is happy.

By *Robert Gammon*

November 12, 2008

San Francisco's plan to take an additional 25 million gallons of water a day from the wild and scenic Tuolumne River was an outrage. Over the next two decades, the proposed water grab would have damaged a spectacular watershed near Yosemite, devastated salmon runs in the Sierra foothills, and further threatened the fragile Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. Nonetheless, the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission was steaming ahead with its controversial plan late last year — until it ran into Peter Drekmeier and the Tuolumne River Trust.

Drekmeier, Bay Area program director for the trust, a nonprofit dedicated to protecting the Tuolumne, strongly opposed San Francisco's plan and went to work to stop it. The SFPUC, which already siphons 225 million gallons of water of day from the river, had claimed it needed more to satiate the thirst of its customers — specifically, the 27 other Bay Area agencies that it sells water to. But Tuolumne River Trust staffers and others dug deep into San Francisco's proposal and discovered that the supposed increased demand for water was wildly exaggerated.

For example, the City of Hayward, which already buys about 19.3 million gallons of water a day from the SFPUC, had told the agency that it would need a total of 27.9 million gallons a day by 2030. Hayward was projecting a 45 percent jump at a time when other cities are turning to water conservation and water recycling for their future water needs. But as this newspaper reported last year, a closer look at Hayward's estimate revealed that it was based on overly optimistic projections of population and job growth. Eventually, city officials backed off their projections, and told the SFPUC that it should not rely on them, describing their water needs as "less urgent at this time." "It's clear that the projections for more water were inflated, and the projections for water conservation were underestimated," Drekmeier told Eco Watch.

Drekmeier's nonprofit also noted that the SFPUC's plan would cut off much-needed fresh water for the Delta, and harm a picturesque watershed just outside

Yosemite National Park. The stretch along the Tuolumne, below Hetch Hetchy and above Don Pedro Lake, features waterfalls, giant pines, and abundant wildlife. Each year, thousands of vacationers visit the area. Two of the more popular destinations are the City of Berkeley's Tuolumne Family Camp and the City of San Francisco's Camp Mather.

In addition, the state Department of Fish and Game warned that taking more water from the Tuolumne would further devastate a Chinook salmon run below Don Pedro. According to stats from Fish and Game and Drekmeier, the Chinook count below the giant reservoir plummeted from 18,000 adults eight years ago to just 217 last year.

The Tuolumne River Trust urged the SFPUC to abandon its water grab completely, and hinted that it would sue to stop it. Although the agency found the nonprofit's arguments persuasive, it refused to completely give up its additional designs on the river. Instead, it agreed to a compromise, which it approved on October 30. That deal calls for the SFPUC to cap water sales at current levels for the next ten years. The pact also includes a provision to take an additional 2 million gallons of water a day from the Tuolumne during extended droughts. "This was a major victory for the wild and scenic Tuolumne River," Drekmeier said. "A year ago we faced a proposal to divert an additional 25 million gallons of water per day from the Tuolumne — enough to fill 1,000 swimming pools. We've come along way."

But not everyone is happy with the new pact. Like Drekmeier, Jeff Miller, director of the Alameda Creek Alliance, supports the SFPUC's larger \$4.4 billion plan to upgrade the Hetch Hetchy water system and retrofit it to withstand a large earthquake. But Miller and the Alameda Creek Alliance are upset that the SFPUC reached a compromise over the Tuolumne River but ignored their concerns about Alameda Creek, the East Bay's largest tributary to San Francisco Bay.

For more than a decade, Miller and the alliance have fought to restore a steelhead trout run in the creek, from the bay in Fremont, through Niles Canyon, and up to the oak-studded hills south of Pleasanton and Livermore. But those efforts may be stymied permanently by another aspect of the SFPUC's plans. The agency, as part of the pact it approved late last month, is forging ahead with its plan to starve the creek of water during the rainy winter months.

The agency will grab the rainwater in a diversion dam near Little Yosemite in the Sunol Regional Wilderness and send all of it to the Calaveras Dam, once its earthquake retrofit is completed in 2012. The agency claims it needs the water for San Francisco and its additional 1.7 million customers around the Bay Area. But Miller argues that the city has not done nearly enough to improve its water conservation and water recycling programs. "San Francisco, which is ranked as the second greenest US city in 2007, should be interested in operating an ecologically sustainable water system," he said.

Miller, who also works for the Center for Biological Diversity, one of the most active environmental groups in the West, had asked the SFPUC to knock down the diversion dam in Little Yosemite and let the fresh water flow freely into Alameda Creek. Miller noted that Calaveras reservoir already is supplied by the rainwater runoff from Mount Hamilton. But the SFPUC refused the alliance's request. As a result, Miller and his group may end up having to travel the same path that so many other environmental groups have taken to protect wildlife — going to court.