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Troubled waters

Water advocates see dry monitoring wells as red flags

By [Vic Cantu](#)

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The recent discovery that two important Butte County water-monitoring wells have gone dry has increased concerns about proposed long-term pumping of Northstate water to Southern California.

Located in the Neal Road area, the wells measure local water quality by pumping water up from Butte County's main underground water supply, the Tuscan aquifer. On Jan. 29 the county's Public Works Department informed the Board of Supervisors that the wells were dry. The information was on the board's consent agenda, and the item was pulled by Supervisor Maureen Kirk for further discussion.

Barbara Vlamis, executive director for local water watchdog group AquAlliance, called the empty wells "a red flag or a canary in the coal mine" that caution against proposals such as one by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation to send local water south.

That proposal, still in its formative stages and known as the "North to South Water Transfer Program" (see Newslines, "Water worries," Jan. 13, 2011), would take large amounts of water, 600,000 acre-feet per year, from California's biggest water supply, the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, and send it to arid regions in Southern California over a 10-year period.

"This project is the most immediate and significant threat to our water," Vlamis said. She added that many local districts are also preparing to sell water to the south in other projects. "These districts think they can manage the fallout, but greed is too big a problem to manage," Vlamis said, referring to financial incentives offered to Northstate politicians.

She explained that many dry areas south of the Bay Area and in Central California that purchase water from the north have huge political clout, such as the Westlands Water District, near Fresno, which is the largest agricultural water district in the United States. Vlamis said the



Barbara Vlamis talks with a local TV news reporter along the banks of the Feather River. FILE PHOTO BY TOM GASCOYNE

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temptation to carelessly sell the area large quantities of water is great due to the few political representatives found in the North State's lightly populated rural districts.

"We're water rich but politically poor," she said. "Whereas places down south like Westlands are the opposite: water poor but politically rich."

One person not surprised by the dry wells is Paul Gosselin, director of the Butte County Department of Water and Resource Conservation. He says the wells were located near fractured rock areas, which can give unreliable readings. Echoing Gosselin is Christina Buck, water resources scientist with the same department. Buck said she's seen wells dry up here in past years, such as in 2008 and 2009. However, she said, several rainy years followed, and the wells became "wet" again in May 2012.

Vlams cited this as a good reason to be cautious about sending water south. "The years 2010 and 2011 were good water-replenishing years," Vlams said. "So if it took from 2009 to 2012 for those dried wells to recover, it warrants extreme concern for exploiting this resource."

Buck shares this concern, but said the recent dry wells are part of a downward trend in local water levels documented since 2000. She is not sure of the reasons, but says levels may have been aggravated by the drought between 2006 and 2009. Gosselin and Buck say their most pressing concern is to create a comprehensive inventory and analysis report on the specific causes of the changing water levels and sustainability.

Buck said such a report is overdue; one like it has not been generated by her department since 2001. Proposals for it are in the works, and she hopes work will begin on it "in the next few months."

Vlams said uncertainty as to the cause of the lowering levels represents a "smoking gun" that speaks against allowing local water to be purchased by Southern California in large quantities. Further, she warns that the North to South project may be approved before the county's comprehensive report is finished.

However, Pete Lucero, public affairs officer for the U.S. Department of Reclamation's Mid-Pacific Region, said that finalization for the project is at least a year away, as an environmental-impact report will probably not be complete until the end of 2013. After that, public comment and review will be solicited before the final details are worked out, he explained.

Still, Vlams will be making her case on the possible dangers of the North to South project at Chico State's Sustainability Conference March 7.

"If we don't know why our water levels are declining or how long it takes to replenish the groundwater, then we must exercise caution," Vlams said.