

# Restoration would revive San Joaquin River's beauty

**WALT SHUBIN**

I was raised along the San Joaquin River near Kerman and have farmed grapes in the area all my life. As boys, before the construction of Friant Dam, my brother and I caught salmon in the river and hunted in the lush woodlands along the river banks, a riparian zone extending all the way down to Mendota.

The salmon were so thick we could scoop them out of the river with a pitchfork. Being in the woods along the river was like being in the middle of a rain forest surrounded by desert. The river forest was so dense sunlight couldn't get through. Down in the river bottom you couldn't see the surrounding farmland and desert. You couldn't see anything but wilderness. It was really beautiful.

Then the river died below Kerman in 1947 when the Bureau of Reclamation began diverting 98% of the river out of its bed at Friant, much of the water going south to Tulare and Kern counties. The woodlands along the river near my home dried up, the salmon vanished and died and the groundwater recharge that Kerman area farmers used to enjoy disappeared.

For the first time in half a

century, the bureau, in a pilot program initiated this summer, allowed more water to flow downstream from Friant, 52 miles downstream to Mendota, to determine how quickly the riparian corridor could be restored. It didn't take long. I recently took friends on a canoe ride near Kerman, reliving my boyhood. We were startled to see all the wildlife and fish in the river that quickly recolonized the former dry riverbed.

## Firsthand view

I urge Bee readers interested in river restoration to take a canoe back through history in this temporarily restored stretch of river in the next month because, I am sad to say, the bureau intends to cut off flows again in a few weeks and the riverbed will revert back to dry sand.

It is time to think about permanent restoration of the river between Friant and Mendota, both to help wildlife and farmers. I have read the recent letters to the editor discussing the efforts of Reps. George Radanovich and Richard Pombo to block fed-

eral aid for restoration of flows between Fresno and Mendota under the American Rivers Heritage Initiative. I don't think they realize they are harming small farmers out on the Valley floor.

Heritage River Initiative listing for the San Joaquin River is a great idea and will help farmers in my part of the Valley as well as wildlife. "Local control" of the river's water has, in fact, been control by corporate interests outside the watershed, who now want to sell "surplus" water to Los Angeles. There is no surplus water in the San Joaquin.

California law states that Madera and Fresno counties have first right to beneficial use of the river water before it is shipped out of the watershed to other counties. Why isn't this law being enforced? Fresno and Madera county supervisors should educate themselves on this point.

I am also disturbed that some Bee letter writers seem more concerned about the river water supplies for big Kern County agribusiness corporations than they do for our local small farmers. Bee readers need to know that not all farmers in this valley think we should keep every river dry all the time. Bee readers need to know that some individ-

uals who claim to speak for family farmers are, in fact, speaking for giant agribusiness companies.

Contrary to one letter writer's claim, the "stakeholders" on the San Joaquin include more than agribusiness interests, they include all the people of California.

## Right concept

The San Joaquin River Parkway is a wonderful idea and it should be expanded all the way from Highway 99 to Mendota. If the San Joaquin River is restored, as I believe it should, then cutbacks will have to be made in deliveries to Tulare and Kern counties, which are out of the watershed. Interests in those counties can make up the loss by buying water out of the state aqueduct. The San Joaquin River has suffered enough.

The Heritage River Initiative should have been given a chance to provide some federal aid for the San Joaquin River. If the politicians would quit meddling on behalf of interests located outside of the San Joaquin watershed, the river would have a better chance of being reborn to the benefit of local farmers, all residents of Fresno and Madera counties and all Californians.