

GORDY SLACK

## Drowning Los Vaqueros, Again

**T**HE RAIN BEGINS TO SLOW AS I head east on Highway 4 near Brentwood. As I pass through the entrance to the Contra Costa Water District's Los Vaqueros Watershed the sun emerges, turning the dull, oak studded hills into a verdant, almost ultraviolet display. I pull over to look for a rainbow and find instead, peering over one of these green, green hills, the snow-covered peak of Mount Diablo.

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If I could spare a few days, I could hike from here to the top of Mount Diablo some 20 miles northwest, and then on to Walnut Creek, without leaving protected land.

This 18,500-acre valley, called Los Vaqueros, falls between the towns of Livermore and Brentwood, only about one hour's drive east of San Francisco. In addition to what may be the world's highest concentration of resident golden eagles, this singularly beautiful place hosts San Joaquin kit foxes, red-legged frogs, Alameda whipsnakes, California tiger salamanders, badgers, burrowing owls, prairie falcons, fairy shrimp, and an impressive variety of other plants and animals, many of them threatened or endangered. Accommodating these creatures is a mosaic of habitats that includes sagebrush and chaparral, riparian and alkali wetlands, grasslands, and blue and valley oak woodlands.

Also in this valley is a brand new 100,000-acre-foot reservoir, the first major reservoir to be built in California in a decade and a half.

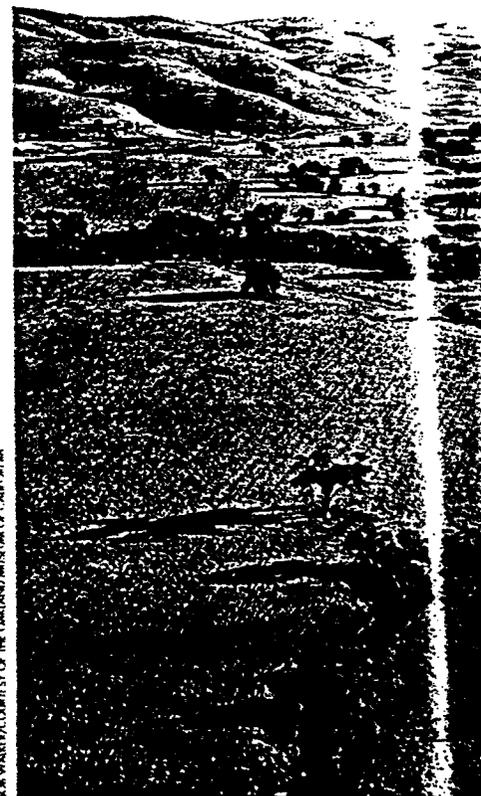
In a compromise they hoped would spare most of the watershed from development, many Bay Area environmentalists supported (or at least didn't oppose) the reservoir project back in 1988, when a ballot measure raising funds for it was

passed. Though an ardent enemy of most dams, U.S. Congressman George Miller, for example, signed the ballot argument in favor of the Los Vaqueros project. The Sierra Club and Audubon Society were silent on the issue. The loss of the valley bottom (including more than 1,000 mature oaks, some as many as 800 years old) would be substantial, they reasoned, but the protection of the rest of the watershed would justify it. The Contra Costa Water District (CCWD), which bought, built, and operates the reservoir, also promised to create a network of recreational trails in the watershed and to mitigate for the loss of the valley's bottom by replanting oak woodlands, creating new wetlands, and restoring riparian habitat above and below the

reservoir. Making Los Vaqueros especially valuable as habitat is the fact that it is one of the biggest pieces of a jigsaw of preserved land in the East Bay, reaching more than 20 miles from Mount Diablo State Park and Walnut Creek's open space to the northwest, to Brushy Peak Regional Park.

Mitigation for the reservoir has included the planting of acorns and seedlings in what might one day be several hundred additional acres of valley oak and blue oak habitat. Cottonwoods, red willows, California rose, California buckeye, and elderberry have been planted along creeks. About 19 acres of seasonal and perennial wetlands have been created in the watershed, and another 30 acres of existing wetland have been fenced off from cattle. These and other environmental mitigations have come at a price, about \$20 million.

When the reservoir proposal was first put on the ballot, the 1982 battle over the Peripheral Canal was still a recent memory. There were some skeptics who opposed the reservoir in Los Vaqueros from the beginning, suspecting that it would be a foot in the door for big water interests who would later return to enlarge the reservoir and weave it into the state's water system, benefiting Central Valley mega-



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farmers and southern Californian water users more than anyone else. One of the most controversial proposals in California's controversy-riddled water-management history, the Peripheral Canal would have carried fresh, north Delta water 50 miles to the south, where it would have been stored in reservoirs, such as Los Vaqueros, and then carried to the State Water Project canal and on to urban and agricultural centers further south. Unwilling to siphon any more water from the Delta's ailing ecosystems to feed southern California's growth, 60 percent of California's voters (95 percent in Contra Costa County) said no to the canal.

But the south's thirst persists.

Los Vaqueros is ideally positioned for above-ground, off-stream storage in a peripheral canal-type setup. It is near the southern end of the Delta and six miles from the Clifton Court Forebay, the beginning of the California Aqueduct. And in 1997, before the new dam was completed, state and federal officials were already publicly discussing the possibility of a much bigger dam at Los Vaqueros and a ten-fold increase—from 100,000-acre-feet to a million acre-feet—in the amount of water stored in the valley. (For comparison, Hetch Hetchy, San Francisco's Sierran reservoir, holds about 300,000 acre-feet of water. An acre-foot is the amount of



requested by the *Contra Costa Times*, the CCWD has been energetically working with CalFed to develop a plan for expanding Los Vaqueros.

Meanwhile, what had been an ambitious multi-use recreation plan for the watershed that included horse and bike trails, extensive hiking trails, fishing, boating, and swimming, was cut down to a minimum of hiking and multi-use trails. "The current recreation plan is about a tenth of what it was planned to be," says Tim Donahue, chairman of the Mount Diablo Chapter of the Sierra Club.

Donahue was a member of an advisory committee that provided recommendations regarding the watershed recreation program. The committee, composed of two dozen recreational and environmental organizations, from boaters to birders, was recruited by the CCWD. When the committee presented their recommendations, their suggestions for multi-use trails were rejected in place of a far more restrictive recreation plan.

Donahue suspects that the water district sought to minimize recreational use of the watershed in order to prevent a strong constituency of users from forming. Such a constituency of invested users could represent a major threat to the district, were it to try expanding the reservoir along the lines of the CalFed proposal. It would be a lot harder to take recreation away from people than to avoid giving it to them in the first place, says Donahue.

Gina Oltman, spokesperson for CCWD, says that recreation must be balanced with environmental protection and the water district's primary goal, preserving water quality. Asked if the CCWD would approve the expansion, Oltman said the board of the water district would only consider it if the water district were to retain control of the reservoir, if the project would enhance the Delta's environmental health, and if it were to be paid for by the state and federal governments. Furthermore, she said, CCWD would have to get voters' approval. For voters to accept such a proposal they would have to be promised lots and lots of clean and, above all else, cheap, water. (Despite promises of cheaper water when the first Los Vaqueros reservoir was proposed, CCWD has some of the costliest water in northern California.)

*Left: Los Vaqueros is on the border between the dry, grassland habitats of the Central Valley, and the wetter, coastal habitats of the East Bay. This is a view of the valley before it was inundated in 1998.*

*Below: In 1998, the Contra Costa County Water District began filling Los Vaqueros with water pumped to it from the Delta. A new proposal by CalFed would replace the existing reservoir with one ten times its size.*



Barry Nelson, Save the San Francisco Bay's Senior Fellow, is worried about CCWD's interest in the expansion. In addition to inundating much of the remaining watershed, Nelson says, the CalFed plan may also further encourage over-tapping of the Delta instead of emphasizing water conservation incentives as a way out of California's water mess.

"I haven't seen any credible evidence that more surface storage is needed," says Nelson. Furthermore, the expansion project is part of a new wave of dam building: "Building new dams is the hottest new proposal from CalFed. A few years ago new dams weren't even on the radar screen. Now proposals are everywhere," Nelson says. "There's a long history of promising dams that will give environmental benefits, but those benefits have never been realized. The Red Bluff diversion dam, for instance, was sold to the public as an environmental dam and it's been an absolute catastrophe.

"They say a bigger Los Vaqueros would hold water that could be used to maintain fresh-water-dependent habitats in the dry season. But if we're really after environmental protection and restoration, building more dams, or bigger ones, would hardly be the best bang for our buck." 

water that covers an acre to a depth of one foot, and the amount used annually by an average California family.)

CalFed is a coalition of 14 agencies and organizations representing the federal government and state and local governments, agriculture, urban water users, water districts, and environmental organizations. The coalition was formed in 1995 to forge solutions to the Delta's worsening water quality and water supply wars. In December 1998, CalFed released its Bay-Delta Plan, and Los Vaqueros, Shasta, and Friant reservoirs were recommended as sites that could be expanded for storing more water in wet years, to release in dry ones.

One thousand four hundred acres are currently under water at Los Vaqueros. If the CalFed inundation of the valley takes place, it will submerge another 3,000 acres. Virtually all of the mitigation done for the smaller reservoir will be drowned. So will much of the recreation and open space promised to voters in the original reservoir deal. So will the 40 or so significant archeological sites, holding clues to ancient native Californian use of the watershed.

It may never be clear whether or not the CCWD had planned, or hoped, to increase the size of Los Vaqueros right from the start, but that they are entertaining the possibility now is abundantly clear. According to documents