

Delta fish slaughter a tragedy

By Michael Fitzgerald

The Christian radio fake who predicted the apocalypse would occur on Saturday proved to be wrong, but there is a fish apocalypse occurring in the Delta.

The Center for Biological Diversity sounded the alarm. Pumps operated by the federal Central Valley Project and State Water Project are massacring millions of fish.

Subsequently, activist Dan Bacher reckoned the mighty pumps south of Tracy that suck water from the Delta for Big Ag and Southern California cities killed, in just three days from May 16 to 18, 1.9 million specimens of one species alone, the Sacramento splittail.

In three days.

That's not counting spring-run chinook salmon and other species caught in the pumps and slaughtered.

The splittail is a minnow. Like the Delta smelt, it sits near the bottom of the Delta food chain; like the Delta smelt, it is an "indicator species." Its health reflects the estuary's overall health.

But unlike the Delta smelt, the splittail is not listed as an endangered species. Environmentalists say it ought to be.

A denizen of the western Delta's brackish waters, the splittail spawns in grassy shallows such as the Yolo Bypass. When they grow to a few centimeters in length, they move off flood plains and downstream.

Their numbers fell to such lows during the drought that the "fall trawl" fish census last year found ... (pause for effect) ... 0.



The pumps near Tracy are being blamed for the deaths of millions of Sacramento splittail fish

But the feds point to science that says the splittail rebounds exponentially during wet years. Even though those merciless pumps may kill as many as 5.5 million of them.

"We found that during wetter winters, the numbers come back dramatically," said Steve Martarano, a spokesman for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "That's what's happening this year."

I'm sure the splittail can handle wet and dry years, part of Delta species' wondrous evolutionary adaptation to their dynamic environment.

But I don't buy that such huge kills are OK. You can't kill 5.5 million of anything and expect a species to flourish.

Jeff Miller, a conservation advocate with the Center for Biological Diversity, agrees.

"If we kill significant portions of the juvenile population through pumping operations, we're not going to have enough splittail reach spawning age," Miller

worried. “We’re going to be back to the same perilous cycle they’ve been in the last decade. Record low numbers.”

I don’t know what’s considered “significant portions” of young splittail. Or whether Bacher’s 1.9 million qualifies.

Bacher’s count was over just three days. According to the state Department of Fish and Game’s website, between May 1 and May 22, the pumps have sucked in 4,160,407 splittail.

Four million living creatures.

Technically, these fish are called “salvage,” because some are saved. The percentage is small, though.

Bill Jennings of the California Sportfishing Protection Alliance also considers the kills tragic.

“This should have been the rebuilding year for splittail,” Jennings said. “It’s perfect conditions for reproduction. But we’re scalping it. This is why we don’t get rebounds. Or if we do, the high point is always lower than the last high point.”

A recent Bay Institute study shows splittail in decline over the past several decades. But they have not declined to the brink of extinction, which is what it takes to get a species listed as endangered.

For Delta smelt, which are threatened, the pumps are turned off at certain times. Splittail enjoy no such protection.

Of course, the pump’s managing agencies could turn off the pumps merely out of prudence, since all the reservoirs south of the Delta are brimful. Nope.

So the band grinds on.

I think those pumps are finally being seen for what they are: technology with such an excessively destructive side they are relics of an environmentally backward era. The Central Valley’s aquatic Chernobyl.

The peripheral canal debate seems to acknowledge that. Proposals call for locating new pumps upstream

around Freeport, where they will not doom so many fish.

On the other hand, some of the greedy and obtuse water users south of the Delta remain astonishingly hostile to nature.

The far-right Congressman Devin Nunes, R-Visalia, a corporate water puppet, has introduced HR1837. His legislation seeks to undo the San Joaquin River restoration, bypass state Delta safeguards and guarantee water to Big Ag farms.

His bill would allow these special interests to crowd to the front of the line of water rights, though their rightful legal place is at the tail end.

In so legislating, Nunes makes himself a historic agent of extinction, like the 1800s cowboys who shot thousands of buffalo from passing railcars simply for sport.

This just in: The latest state figures, released late Tuesday, say the one-day “salvage” of splittail at state and federal pumps Monday was 522,539 - half a million fish in one day.