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Stanislaus and Tuolumne Rivers
Groundwater Basis Association
Groundwater Sustainability Agency
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Dear Sir or Madam:

Comments on Modesto Subbasin GSP-DRAFT

We have studied the Tuolumne River Flood Mitigation and Direct Recharge Project (Project 7) of the Modesto Subbasin GSP-Draft and have the following comments.

We are concerned that the environmental beneficial uses of flood releases have not been considered. The river needs flooding to rejuvenate the riparian forest, flush invasive weeds, provide habitat for juvenile salmonids, and refresh the spawning riffles. Each of these needs could be negatively impacted if the flood releases are not made with these needs in mind. Gravel (spawning rock) must move each year to keep it clean of sand and silt. The gravel will begin to move when the releases are bank full (5,000 – 7,000 cfs) for several days. Therefore, flood releases are critical to the health of the fishery in many different ways.

Relying on the current Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) to determine available water is projecting into the future—a future that is likely to be different than expected. This document assumes water above the current customer demands and the “recommended” instream flow obligations, is available. It is unwise to commit flows to a new customer base. The license can

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be reopened and climate change is only one possible reason. The flows determined adequate at this point in time may be determined to be inadequate in the future.

Current customers will benefit from the new income stream as the additional agricultural acres are brought online. Additional revenue to cover fixed costs will benefit the current customer base. But, financial benefit for customers is not the purpose of the subbasin plan. The health of the ground water basin, without damaging the Tuolumne River, is the purpose of this plan.

The Project Description describes diverting 20,000 AF during Wet and Above Normal water years. The water year types are determined in May of each year, following the season for flood releases. Only preliminary determinations are available before April, with the first being February 15. Therefore, connecting the flood releases to water year type is not functional.

The FERC license Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) staff alternative includes the measure “Modify the proposed spill management plan to include a provision for annual consultation with resource agencies to determine the preferred magnitude, duration, and timing of releases made under the plan and specific criteria for evaluation whether project operations during the descending limb of the spring snowmelt runoff period reasonably mimic the natural hydrograph.” The Districts proposed “Develop a spill management plan to maximize the benefit of spill events for fall-run Chinook salmon floodplain rearing subject to the constraints of flood control, project safety, and water demands to include a provision for annual consultation with resource agencies to determine the preferred magnitude, duration, and timing of controllable spill events....” Groundwater recharge is not included in the list of potential uses of flood releases in the FEIS.

Careful reading of 8.2.3.1.5, “Implementation Criteria, Status, and Strategy” is confusing. The phrase “for direct recharge during the growing season” does not seem to coordinate with recharge during flood releases. Any delivery during the growing season cannot be deemed to be flood mitigation and should be handled under a separate section of the GSP. This section is confusing and needs more explanation in the GSP.

The following comment is based on an assumption that may not be true. If it is true that customers of MID are not allowed to install wells for groundwater pumping, then it appears that the new customers will have an advantage. In the wet years, they would receive surface water via irrigation infrastructure. In the dry years they will be allowed to pump groundwater. That appears to put the new customers in a no-loss situation where they will always have irrigation water, and as early in the year as they need. Some analysis of this would be helpful to readers.

We look forward to a more thorough description and analysis of the Tuolumne River Flood Mitigation and Direct Recharge Project (Project 7).

Sincerely,
Allison and Dave Boucher
Project Managers

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