

Meters, big dam needed someday, water head says

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California, the place that calls itself water-wise and conservation conscious, will begin seeing some of those ideals in the long-distrusted federal water agency located here.

So says the man whose hand rests on the state's largest faucet.

Larry Hancock, new director of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation's Mid-Pacific region based in Sacramento, takes over an agency long accused of building huge waterworks and caring little about environmental damage caused by those projects.

He says Auburn Dam might someday be built, that Sacramento should have water meters, and that his agency isn't the bad guy anymore.

Hancock, a 27-year bureau employee, is the region's first director appointed under the agency's new directive — maintaining, operating and modifying existing water projects, while improving conservation and coordinated use of existing ground and surface water supplies.

"We think environmental issues have changed, now that they've been identified," Hancock said during a meeting with editors of The Sacramento Union. "We don't want to lay blame."

"It's difficult to assess how much damage the Central Valley (Project) has caused, that the State (Water) Project has caused," he said.

To resurrect some of the lost environment, two proposed bureau projects — both on Hancock's Top Five priorities list — would help revive the Sacramento River's ailing salmon fishery. Salmon have suffered heavily along the Lake Shasta-to-Bakersfield reaches of the CVP.

Key to improving the fishery is the Shasta Temperature Control Device, a mechanism to allow dam operators to regulate the temperature of the Sacramento River to meet salmon spawning requirements.

Modifying the Red Bluff Diversion Dam, the second fishery project on the list, to allow migrating salmon to more easily pass through the dam may also stabilize the declining salmon population. Existing fish ladders have not worked.

Atop his Top Five are the controversial "Bay-Delta" hearings being conducted by the state Water Resources Control Board. Those hearings, which are over a year behind schedule because of procedural revisions requested by the water industry, will determine how waters from the environmentally sensitive Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta and San Francisco Bay will be used.

Also on his list is resumption of plans to sell 1.5 million acre-feet of

water, the last remaining unsold portion of marketable Northern California water. At the bottom of the Top Five is the San Joaquin Valley Environmental Restoration Program.

"There's only two items on that agenda that could be construed as helping our traditional constituents at all," Hancock said. The two items, new standards from the Bay-Delta hearings and changes in Red Bluff's operation, could make more water available for Southern and Central California.

"So for people to continuously say the bureau hasn't changed its mission, I think is way off base," he said.

Absent from his list is Auburn Dam.

"We would build a multipurpose facility if that's what's wanted. We are not promoting it or demoting it," he said. "From my perspective, the bureau should not be taking, and we are not taking, any position in terms of whether to build a multipurpose large dam."

"The way we see the Auburn Dam issue now is that the local interests have to come to some type of agreement on what it is they want," he said.

"They really have to come to agreement and say . . . whether they want a project that will provide flood protection only or whether they want a project that will provide a water supply and generate energy and provide additional recreation."

"Without that consensus from the counties, there's not very much for the bureau to do."

With growing concern over the huge federal deficit, Hancock said it is "unrealistic" to think Congress will pay the entire cost of a multipurpose Auburn Dam.

"It's really the constituents of California and the people who have a need for additional water supply that are the ones who may end up having to pay for that project," he said.

On a sensitive Sacramento taboo, Hancock supports the evil words — water meters. Pressure is building on both Sacramento and Fresno, the state's last remaining unmetropolitan areas, to impose the devices.

"If I was on the (city) council, I'd vote for meters," he said.

"I think it's a proven fact that water meters make people a little more conservation oriented," he said. "We can do a lot of things without metering to get the American public to recognize that water is one of our most precious resources."

"But I guess the bottom line, if people don't do that, then we have to find some financial incentives to make them do that," he said.

"And metering is certainly a way to do that."