



Water And Politics Don't Always Mix

Commentary by Nat Bingham

The recent dispute over the status of salmon in the Garcia River illustrates the dilemma that scientists who study natural resources, and who are given the responsibility of reporting data concerning resources to decision makers often find themselves in.

For the last decade, a group of concerned citizens and fishermen have been attempting to restore salmon and steelhead runs to the Garcia River. Known as Save Our Salmon (S.O.S.), led by Len Craig, this group had been rearing salmon for release in the Garcia River.

They had observed a progressive degradation of fish habitat in the river. The coho salmon that they were raising didn't seem to be reproducing as expected and then a landslide choked the intake to their rearing pond. S.O.S. was of the opinion, based on their long observation of the river, that the loss of fish habitat and fish in the Garcia River was due to the long-term effects of timber harvest in the basin.

Fifth District Supervisor Norman de Vall was contacted and concern was expressed to him. He, in turn, wrote a letter to State Senator Barry Keene, who passed along a request for a study of the fisheries situation in the Garcia River to the California Department of Fish and Game.

Meanwhile, Louisiana-Pacific, the major property owner and timber harvester in the basin also got concerned.

The heat was definitely on, and they weren't looking too good. One of the oldest salmon restoration groups in the state put out of business by a landslide, caused by timber harvest?

L-P quickly convened a meeting with the fish people. I attended the meeting.

L-P got on record up front at the meeting that the landslide that had choked the pond intake was not their fault - - that, in fact, this was the result of an "old harvest site" that they hadn't done but that they were willing, in fact - - eager, to help get the salmon ponds back in production.

The fishing peoples' response was that, while they, too, wanted to get S.O.S. going again, it would not be acceptable as a substitute for a strong fish habitat protection commitment from the timber harvesting industry. Prevention is way cheaper than cure.

L-P stated that they were in fact using the best harvest practices in the Garcia Basin and that they were preparing to cooperate in a basin fish assessment to be done by the Calif. Dept. of Fish

and Game.

The Garcia River fish controversy had, by this time, become public knowledge and the folks to whom timber harvest per se is bad, were putting on the pressure.

So Fish and Game comes into a loaded situation. The fishermen and the environmentalists want the study to say that logging wiped out the fish. The timber companies want the study to say that the fish are better off than ever, thanks to clearcutting.

Try putting yourself into the shoes of the biologist doing the study. On one hand, your duty is to try and protect the fish, and the fish people are hollering for you to take a strong stand. On the other hand, your best shot might be not to alienate the professional forester in charge and try to work with him to get him to improve his company's forest practices. (He can deny access to his land to Fish and Game except when a pre-harvest inspection, is done.) Under these circumstances, it's hard to hang on to "scientific objectivity."

In the case of the Garcia, it appears that the latter choice may have been followed. Normal fish population survey protocols were not followed. The data was displayed in a letter to Norman de Vall rather than in a formal report format. Some of the participants in the survey who were named in the letter did not get to review it before it was sent, and the survey did not undergo any kind of scientific peer review. As to the conclusion reached in the letter that "there are not now significant problems for aquatic life resulting from current logging," I simply cannot say if this is so. I believe the data may be flawed.

I think that what should have happened is that some kind of work group should have been set up which included all parties to the dispute -- the fishermen, the foresters, the environmentalists and Fish and Game. Everyone's interests should have been put on the table and then, perhaps, the study could have been done more objectively with a greater sense of participation and hands-on involvement by all parties.

For certain, if parties to a dispute, are not included in the development of the solution of the problem, they will almost always be against what is proposed. From reading the letter, it sounds like Fish and Game would like to include everybody next time out on the Garcia. I sure hope that happens.