



Large cross section of community shares water concerns with federal officials on new plans

Public comments taken until month's end

For Immediate Release: May 5, 2015

Contact: Mike Jensen

209-722-5761

mjensen@mercedid.org

MERCED, CA – Following a meeting between more than 200 concerned residents and federal regulators last week, public comments about the local water supply in eastern Merced County can be submitted through the end of May.

At issue is the relicensing of New Exchequer Dam on Lake McClure by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. After years of studies, the Commission released a draft environmental document for the new license in March. Spanning 674 pages, the draft Environmental Impact Statement proposes significantly increasing flows on the Merced River. This would have a host of local impacts on eastern Merced County, ranging from decreased irrigation supplies to losses of groundwater.

On Thursday evening, dozens of local farmers and concerned members of the community converged on meeting at the Merced Fairgrounds for more than two hours with staff from the federal regulatory commission.

In all, nearly 250 concerned residents attended the meeting, representing a host of local interests, from agriculture, to businesses, finance, disadvantaged communities and local government. More than 40 community members spoke, in addition to several elected leaders.

Among the concerns raised:

- Drought-like conditions, similar to what is being experienced now, would occur more frequently with a reduction in water storage at Lake McClure under the new requirements. Water would instead be diverted down the Merced River to the Bay Delta.

- Groundwater throughout cities and communities will be negatively impacted by diverting water away from eastern Merced County.
- Decreased water supply to eastern Merced County would exacerbate already-high unemployment and negatively impact the economic fabric of the community.

Richard Kilgore of Le Grand Community Service District said any decrease in water supply throughout eastern Merced County would harm his community by impacting groundwater. Earlier this year the community lost production of one of its two wells used for domestic water.

“In the most simple terms, we fear our community is going to run out of water as a direct result of the river releases you are suggesting,” Kilgore said. “You cannot just ignore the impacts your proposals will have on our region. Human lives and health are at stake.”

Local farmer and Merced Farm Bureau President Bob Giampaoli said that MID has not increased its size or acreage since the early 1900s. He said the region has continued to thrive on water from Lake McClure and the groundwater recharge it provides.

“We did not ask for your help before, and we have managed in a sustainable manner for decades,” he said. “What you propose brings an end to this that long-standing tradition: the new water releases you propose will have a devastating impact on agricultural and family farms.”

Irene and Luis De La Cruz both spoke of working local fields during their youth and urged the commission to strike a better balance in addressing environmental concerns and the needs of the community.

“There are real people behind these numbers,” said Irene De La Cruz.

Also addressing the commission were local elected leaders. Among them: the mayors of Atwater and Livingston, and the mayor pro tem from the City of Merced, the Chair of the Merced County Board of Supervisors. Assembly Member Adam Gray also spoke to the commission. Senator Anthony Cannella provided written comments as well. With the House of Representatives in session in Washington, DC, Congressman Jim Costa had a staff member there to read a letter on his behalf. Merced County Superintendent of Schools Steve Gomes discussed potential impacts to education. MID Board Directors Jeff Marchini and Scott Koehn also spoke on behalf of MID.

Assembly Member Adam Gray stressed that water decisions must not be made in a vacuum as he addressed the federal energy commission staff.

“We cannot meet the drought challenge, achieve groundwater sustainability, and deal with major flow proposals from the State Water Board and FERC all at the same time,” he said.

A statement from Congress Member Jim Costa said: “If implemented, this draft EIS would only serve to compound the suffering caused by this historic drought over the last four years in Merced County.”

State Senator Anthony Cannella, in a letter, similarly stated: “In all, agriculture generates more than \$7.5 billion dollars of economic activity in Merced County. Without our historic and reliable supply of water, our entire economy will suffer.”

In closing remarks, MID General Manager John Sweigard said that MID has provided significant data and spent millions of dollars in studies developing the best possible science for managing the Merced River in the coming decades.

“MID has always been collaborative on the Merced River and has demonstrated excellent water management and environmental stewardship in coordination with all parties,” he said. “MID has always worked closely with the state and federal fish agencies to protect downstream fisheries, especially during this record drought.

“We are very concerned these draft license conditions will hamstring the District’s ability to adaptively manage and coordinate Merced River operations for the general benefit of all.”

Sweigard also questioned the logic of diverting more water down the Merced River as proposed by Federal Energy Regulatory Commission staff, rather than using a more targeted methodology as proposed by MID.

“There has been absolutely no proven benefit to simply putting more water down the river,” he said.

Following Thursday night’s meeting, public comments must be filed by May 29, 2015. A final environmental document with new water storage requirements is expected from FERC before the end of the year.

MID has created a webpage titled “[FERC Flow Local Impacts](#).” It can be found at the District’s webpage: www.mercedid.org. Additional resources can be found there, including letter templates. Comment letters can be addressed as follows:

Kimberly D. Bose, Secretary
FEDERAL ENERGY REGULATORY COMMISSION
888 – 1st Street, N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20426-0001

Subject: Merced River Hydroelectric Project, FERC Project No. 2179-043
Comments on Flow Proposals

As always, the District also welcomes phone calls for assistance. Please contact Public and Government Affairs Manager Mike Jensen at 209-722-5761.

###

