River conservation groups oppose AB 142, Mokelumne River study bill

Friends of the River and Foothill Conservancy today announced their opposition to Assembly Bill 142 (Bigelow, R-O’Neals), which calls for yet another taxpayer-funded study before the Mokelumne River could be protected with state Wild and Scenic River designation. AB 142 would thwart state protection of the river if wild and scenic designation might possibly result in any negative impact on undefined future local water supply or complications due to climate change.

“The Mokelumne has been the subject of two federal Wild and Scenic River studies, a watershed assessment, and most recently, an interregional water planning process that has cost nearly $900,000 -- all paid for by the taxpayers,” said Steve Evans, Wild Rivers Consultant for statewide conservation organization Friends of the River. “We already know that the river is eligible for Wild and Scenic designation and how the state processes new water rights applications after designation. It’s time to stop the endless study of this important river and protect its eligible sections for generations to come.”

The Mokelumne’s North Fork and Main Stem are eligible for inclusion in the state’s protected rivers system because of their extraordinary scenic beauty, water quality, cultural and historical resources, and recreational values. About 37 miles of the river, from Salt Springs Dam to Pardee Reservoir, were proposed for protection last year in Senate Bill 1199 (Hancock, D-Oakland), which passed the state Senate but did not reach the Assembly floor for a final vote.

“This is a beautiful river our families use as a public park,” said Cecily Smith, Foothill Conservancy Executive Director. “It’s important to local communities and our economy. Local residents need the certainty Wild and Scenic protection will bring rather than having to fight off destructive, costly dams every few years.”

While state Wild and Scenic protection would prohibit new dams and diversions on the designated river reaches, it would not prohibit development of water supply projects on tributary streams or sections of the river upstream, provided those projects don’t harm the river.

“Rather than dreaming of expensive, pie-in-the-sky projects they cannot afford, it’s time for local water agencies to embrace achievable, affordable, environmentally sound options for future water supply,” said Pete Bell, Foothill Conservancy Vice-President. “It concerns us that they seem unwilling to accept a ‘do no harm’ principle for future water projects on this valuable state resource or the well-established ‘user pays’ principle for water supply and water studies. In addition, Amador County can more than double the number of existing users of its water system, and Calaveras County has so much water available from its three rivers that a local water agency is considering selling some of it outside the county.”
Last year, local water agencies and Assemblymember Bigelow successfully stalled SB 1199. As Vice-Chair of the Appropriations Committee, Bigelow was able to block an up-or-down vote on the bill, which had previously passed the Assembly Natural Resources Committee after approval by the state Senate. The bill’s suspension in the Appropriations Committee was due to allegations that it would cost the state money. However, state costs have never been ascribed to any previous Wild and Scenic river designation bill approved by the Legislature.

AB 142 directs the California Natural Resources Secretary to study the suitability of the Mokelumne as a potential Wild & Scenic River and to “consider the potential effects of the proposed designation on future water requirements…and the effects of climate change.” Opponents question the real intent of the bill “… given that so much of the river’s water is already used by communities and farms, and the water agencies supporting AB 142 and its author, Assemblymember Frank Bigelow, made outrageous and untrue claims about designation when they opposed SB 1199 last year,” said Evans. He added that, “It’s odd that Mr. Bigelow is now concerned with climate change since he claimed it was a fraud while running for office in 2012.”

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