

# Will California get smart about water?

by Pamela Lowry

There are signs that the ongoing battle in drought-stricken California over diminishing water supplies is about to enter a new phase. As southern California's Metropolitan Water District voted Jan. 8 to move to the third of its five-phase water restriction plan, five years of drought have begun to raise questions about the wisdom of 20-odd years of environmentalist strictures against building large-scale water projects, projects which could now be mitigating the drought's effects.

Last September, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that "with counties broke, schools in decline, public health a disgrace, and highways in disrepair, a new water system is hardly an urgent necessity." On the contrary, recent events suggest that there is a growing demand for exactly that.

For example, in 1972, environmentalist pressure convinced the voters of the northern California counties of Marin and Sonoma to reject a plan to cooperate in sharing water from the Russian River. Now, those counties are taking measures to implement the plan, whose 10,000 acre-feet of water per year will allow Marin County to lift its water rationing regulations.

## Conservation or water development?

In the California statehouse, Republican State Sen. Matt Maddy has proposed building additional dams and reservoirs to ensure a continued water supply for the state. According to the opposing environmentalist faction, damming rivers only destroys wetlands, for the benefit of greedy and wasteful farmers. The drumbeat in favor of destroying California's irrigated agriculture, which supplies a large proportion of the nation's food supply, is exemplified by State Senate Leader David Roberti, who proposed writing a new state water plan which would include mandatory water conservation for farmers and other agricultural users. He said he had been told that "much of the urban problem would be solved" by a 10% agricultural reduction of water use. This "solution" has been consistently pushed by environmentalist scribblers like Marc Reisner, who contend that California is "squandering water" in an arid desert that has no business sustaining so many people.

With the defeat of Proposition 128, the "Big Green" ref-

erendum, in the November elections, environmentalist pressure has merely taken another tack. The *Los Angeles Times*, even before the defeat, argued that the machinery was already in place to implement the proposition, even if it were to be defeated. This confidence stemmed not only from the passage of draconian federal regulations like the Clean Air Act, but from the fact of the ongoing takeover of public and private utilities by hard-core zero-growthers. At the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, the nation's largest public utility and historically one of the bastions of pro-nuclear, pro-water, and pro-development outlooks, the environmentalists now control a majority of the board.

What the environmentalists hope, in the face of emerging rejection of no-growth, anti-population policies, is that they can maintain the conflicts between city-dwellers and farmers, northern California and southern California, industry and agriculture—all in the name of deciding who will get the shrinking supply of water. This has led to some strange goings-on: Some environmentalists find themselves defending the electronics industries of Silicon Valley, which need large quantities of water to flush the chemicals used to etch printed circuit boards, against the "greed" of those who want to raise food.

## Farmers in desperate straits

California farmers, scheduled to be the first group eliminated from access to water, find themselves urged to view water as a "cash crop" which they will sell to parched cities or wetlands reclamation projects. This precedent has already been set on the California-Nevada border at the town of Fallon, where farmers are directed to sell their water to flood the Stillwater Wildlife Management Area. So far, the only taker has been the Nature Conservancy group, which has tried to set an example to protesting farmers by selling 5,000 acre-feet of water for a cool \$1 million.

The cruel bind faced by farmers and ranchers who are trying to survive the drought, while waiting for more large-scale water infrastructure to be put into place, is exemplified by the situation of wool-growers in Marin and Sonoma counties. There, a fungus called ergot grows naturally on grass in the cool, moist climate near the coast. A relative of LSD, the fungus kills sheep during lambing season, but its effects are minimized when spring rains wash it from the old grass and new grass grows in its place. However, drought conditions this year mean that the old grass contains lethal doses of ergot. Many ewes have died before their lambs were born, and the alternative of feeding them hay is unavailable to many ranchers, because the drought has driven the price of hay to \$145 a ton. Even were the farmers able to make the investment, it would only leave them further in debt, because the consolidation of the area's sheep markets into a single remaining one at Dixon has fixed the price of fat lambs at 49¢ per pound, whereas last year the going price was 57¢ per pound.