

One thing that droughts in the West provoke are political battles over water. The drought that California is currently in is no exception. Republicans in the U.S. House of Representatives have just passed a bill that would - more or less - exempt farmers in the Central Valley from environmental laws like the Endangered Species Act when it comes to withdrawing water from California rivers for irrigation. Projects to restore free-flowing water to the San Joaquin River, allowing the recreation of its long-absent salmon run, would be terminated. The native species and the ecosystem in the California Delta would be left without the water needed to sustain them.

There are lots of problems with the proposed legislation - legislation that isn't going anywhere in the Senate or with a threatened veto from President Obama. But I wanted to highlight one problem with the rhetoric that House Republicans were using to push the legislation. Here is the San Francisco Chronicle [report](#) on the legislation:

Republicans, holding up posters of dead almond trees, argued that allowing rivers to flow to the sea is akin to pouring water down the drain.

Rep. [Tom McClintock](#), R-Elk Grove (Sacramento County), said billions of acre-feet of water have been "dumped into the ocean for the care and amusement of the delta smelt," draining reservoirs "needed to support the threatened human population."

The problem here is a vision that allowing rivers to flow, and fish to swim in them, is a waste of water. That was a vision that drove a lot of development in the Western United States in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. It's the vision that led to drying up the Owens Valley and Owens Lake, nearly destroyed Mono Lake, caused the Colorado River Delta to almost disappear, and put dozens of fish species on the endangered species list. But allowing water to flow down a river isn't wasteful - it supports an ecosystem. An ecosystem, by the way, that also supports lots of other people's livelihoods (like fishermen!).