Editorially Speaking

WHALES, CURSES AND WATER RATIONS

WHY did Delta and Dawn become such a whale of a story? Was it their size or our memory of Humphrey? The last Delta lost Humpback — can you believe that was 20 years ago? Not to mention, why do we give these animal strangers names as if they were our longlost pets?

Perhaps it touches us because of our own fear of becoming lost or alone. I was more taken by a local story of a homing pigeon that walked into Pleasanton’s Y’all Come Back Saloon and wouldn’t leave. Like Delta and Dawn finding their way back to the salty ocean beyond the Golden Gate, Homer’s story had a happy ending as the racing pigeon became lost or exhausted on a race from Nevada and was near its new home in nearby Hayward.

The curse

These stories reminded me of an old haunt under North Michigan Avenue in the bowels of Chicago called Billy Goat Tavern below my office in the Wrigley Building. The tavern became a legend, created in part by journalist Mike Royko, because in 1934 a goat fell off a truck, limped into a tavern owned by Greek immigrant William Sianis, and the fable was born. When he and his goat were expelled from Wrigley Field in 1945 during the Detroit playoffs that the Cubs lost, the legend of the Cubs curse was born and remains to this day. The cave below Michigan Avenue is gone, but eight Billy Goats survive.

We are suckers for legends and happy endings, especially with all the death, destruction and disorientation we see every day. Not unlike the whales, many of us are disoriented by traffic on freeways and mazes, not to mention the uncertainty created by new regulations or the ebb and flow of efforts to make the Delta safe for fish and reliable for water supply.

Takeaway

The lesson is simple: Little problems, like the loss of the wee Delta smelt, don’t age well and can become killer (economic) whales. That is the high-and-dry fate farmers and water districts face because the Department of Water Resources has shut off the huge pumps near Tracy to protect the endangered Delta smelt, hopefully for only 10 days, but it could be longer.

This was followed by another decision to cut back on the amount of water pumped to farmers and Southern California cities to the lowest level ever in a frantic attempt to save the smelt. At last count, only 25 smelt, considered a bellwether for the health of the Delta, were found. The decision follows an Alameda Superior Court Judge’s order to stop pumping water from the Delta within 60 days. Then a Fresno judge ruled that authorities must rewrite their management plan to protect the fish.

Of course there is no certainty that the pumps are the sole cause of smelt loss. Pesticides, other toxics or invasive species could be to blame. Indeed, the state is cracking down on inputs into waterways. That is why those involved with CURES (see Pages 1 and 4) are proud of grower efforts to meet those standards. Reason: Proactive grower solutions are better than turning to lawyers and legislatures for answers. Credit goes to Parry Klassen, CURES executive director, and coalition leaders who have joined the effort.

The trap

There is one catch in these proactive efforts: There is a maze of difficult, mul-tifaceted rules, regulations and water politics that can keep you trapped in Sacramento, not unlike Delta and Dawn. CURES has been working that maze for 10 years. A management plan completed for the San Joaquin kit fox and other species also took 10 years. The management plan the Fresno judge is demanding needs be done in 10 to 30 days.

The upshot: Seek grower proactive solutions while time is on your side. Sniff the air to see what is next. The Air Resources Control Board is coming down with the same kind of challenges as the Water Boards. Be prepared or face the curse of the billy goat.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Great article

I have just subscribed to your magazine. Somehow my subscription lapsed, but all my neighbors still get it. So when I heard that you had published a great article on the E. coli stuff, I ran over to the farm next door to read it. Great coverage. Thank you very much. Community Alliance with Family Farmers has been front and center working on this issue.

Best regards,

Judith Redmond
Full Belly Farm
Guinda

Editor’s note: Redmond is president of CAFF and testified to the Joint Assembly and Senate Committee on Agricultural Information Hearing about the E. coli issue. Find her submitted comments at www.caff.org.

Your are quoted

I read your comments in the Ventura County Star regarding the E. coli leafy green issue. You were quoted as saying:

“I think it’s highly important that we get science involved and get the politics and finger-pointing out of the picture if possible.” The new plan calls for the generic E. coli test, which Richardson said is not nearly sufficient enough.

“You need the E. coli 0157 test,” he said, referring to the E. coli strain that produces a powerful toxin and can cause severe illness. “The cost of that test, considering how important it is, is not all that expensive.”

Your comments are important and have been totally left out of the media discussion up to this point in time. I have been writing on this issue since the fall outbreak and my articles have been published in the California Progress Report (www.californiaprogressreport.com). The industry is well aware of my commentary and has been trying to “fast shuffle” its way to a “quick fix” without honoring the data.

My concern is that the 12,000 acres in the Castroville Sea Water Intrusion Project are overhead spraying leafy green vegetables with tertiary treated sewage (recycled) water. You can read my latest article below using the URL. Read it and tell me that Monterey County doesn’t have a big problem. You can also see why the FDA is so certain another outbreak will occur in 2007.

Acheson said given the history of past foodborne illness outbreaks, there are no guarantees that food safety efforts on farms and in processing facilities will prevent contamination of fresh produce in 2007.

“Is the food supply any safer today than it was in September? No, I don’t believe it is. We are looking at a distinct probability of an outbreak linked to leafy greens in 2007,” he said. “I hope not, but I am a pragmatist. I would be fooling consumers if I said problems solved, don’t worry. Problem is not solved. Understand the relative risk.”

Frank Pecarich
Ventura

Editor’s note: Pecarich retired from the Washington, D.C., headquarters of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation in 1987. During his 26-year federal career, he worked as a soil scientist with the USDA on the now-published Soil Survey for Monterey County. Read his article about irrigating vegetables with treated sewage water at fsrio.nal.usda.gov/news_article.php?article_id=3986.

Albert Einstein on bees

I read your article on the disappearance of bees. It was quite alarming. The following story adds another possibility as to why we might be losing our most valued workers. Albert Einstein prophesized the loss of bees quite succinctly.

Wally Samm
Woodland

Editor’s note: Samm attached an article that blamed the mysterious “colony collapse” of bees on the use of cell phones. The same article quoted Albert Einstein as once saying that if the bees disappeared, “Man would have only four years of life left.” Our original article also made reference to the cell-phone cause claim, but this and the following quotes were left on the editing room floor due to space requirements:

“In France, in 2004, the seed treatment Gauchau was removed because of the risks of seed treatment,” James Doan, Hamlin, N.Y., and owner of 4,300 hives told the House Ag Committee. “Materials with Imidelacloprid in them are labeled for every fruit and vegetable that I pollinate. I don’t know if this is the problem, however in France the year before Gauchau was taken off the market one third of the honeybees in France died. They have not reported any significant losses since.”