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Senior thesis offers vital perspective on Bay-Delta plan

Environmental Studies major Jimmy Carlson isn't shy about expressing his opinions, which helps explain why he presented written comments to state and federal panels about the efficacy of draft plans to preserve the Bay-Delta area.

Carlson's comments, submitted to state lawmakers and the National Marine Fisheries Service, stemmed from his senior thesis, which analyzed conservation efforts to alleviate stressors on the endangered Delta smelt. The 15 pages detailed the pluses and minuses of the Bay-Delta Conservation Plan (BDCP) and impact statement.

"The BDCP is a good start, but there are many uncertainties to the plan that need to be addressed before moving forward," he says. "Reducing the effects from years of anthropogenic (human-caused) alterations with more alterations doesn't seem wise. However, something needs to be done to restore the Delta. The proper decision-making needs to be based on scientific facts, with goals of improved ecosystem structure, function and longevity, rather than the short-term monetary or political interests."

The 30-year-old senior, scheduled to graduate in December, will be the first in his family to earn a college degree. Carlson's Sac State experience has exceeded his expectations in several respects. "I initially wanted to major in Environmental Engineering," he says. But he opted for Sacramento State's Environmental Studies program for family reasons. His longstanding interest in the environment in general and water issues in particular prompted him to hone in on the latter.

Carlson is grateful for the quality education he has received at Sac State. He's particularly appreciative of department support, singling out Chairman Jeffery Foran and Professor Michelle Stevens for their guidance and encouragement.

It was Foran who recommended that Carlson put his revised thesis in public comment format and send it for consideration. "His work was thorough, comprehensive and presented in a highly professional manner," Foran says. "This is the first time an ENVS student has used his/her thesis as the basis for public comments, and I expect Jimmy's work to be particularly influential as the agencies revise and improve the BDCP."

"I haven't heard back from the panels," Carlson says, adding with a grin that he doesn't expect word soon, since the conveyance of California water has been a major issue for more than 150 years.

Although Carlson's public comments focused on the Delta plan's impact on the smelt, he concedes the complexity of the ambitious water project, which could take up to 50 years to construct. He believes, however, that the grand plan to convey water from north to south did not take into sufficient consideration the several challenges and competing constituencies this would involve.

His abiding interest in the environment, thoughtful analysis on water issues and willingness to speak his mind should serve him well once he lands a job with a state or federal agency that focuses on this finite resource.

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