BEFORE THE
CALIFORNIA STATE WATER RESOURCES CONTROL BOARD

HEARING IN THE MATTER OF
CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF WATER RESOURCES AND UNITED STATES
BUREAU OF RECLAMATION
REQUEST FOR A CHANGE IN POINT OF DIVERSION FOR CALIFORNIA WATER FIX

TESTIMONY OF DAVID YEE
SAVE OUR SANDHILL CRANES

Testimony of David Yee
I. INTRODUCTION

This testimony describes how the Delta is an important resource for recreation in the form of wildlife observation, education, and conservation, with an emphasis on bird watching. I will comment on how the Delta Tunnels project would be against the public interest because of its negative impacts on recreational birding.

II. BACKGROUND

I have been an avid bird-watcher since the age of 10. I have travelled the U.S., Central America and Southeast Asia extensively to watch and study birds. However, my main focus and passion for birding is in California, and starting in 1981, San Joaquin County and the Central Valley, became my primary interests. Since 1981, I have averaged five hours/week of observing and studying the identification, status and distribution of birds in San Joaquin County. (See also SOSC-73.)

As a native to the area, I have been able to observe first-hand the changes in land-use in the Delta over the past 50 years. As a keen observer of wildlife and birds over that time, my testimony discusses why the dramatic changes proposed by the Delta Tunnels project would negatively affect the local birdlife, as well as the public’s ability to observe and enjoy it. In addition, I discuss the cultural connections between the local community and the unique environment of the Delta that would be harmed by the Delta Tunnels project.

III. TESTIMONY

It is always tempting to regard the value of recreation in direct dollars produced. For me personally, the term “recreation” has very strong cultural significance. While growing up, what was introduced to me for enjoyment, stimulation, and education was usually a function of both my family/friends and my environment. As a child my father was an avid fisherman. When I was around 10 years of age my father’s interest switched to golfing. My brother and I spent countless hours with him and my mother learning how to fish in the Delta, then golfing at the Stockton Golf and Country Club along the San Joaquin River. We became excellent at both. My parents were also avid campers and I remember spending many summers as a child camping up in the Sierra.
The fishing, golfing, and camping were not unique to my family. We did those things because they were so available in our community, and nearly everyone else did these kinds of activities as well. Growing up in the Delta, nearly all of my friends did activities that took advantage of the unique environment it provided; fishing, hunting, boating, water skiing, bicycling, year-round gardening, and of course nature-watching. For most, the nature-watching was a natural byproduct of one’s activity. But, as in all cultures, the “out-door environment” becomes as important as the activity itself. And in time, it often defines the activity. I can go fishing anywhere in the world, but I always compare it to my best days fishing as a child with my father. Boating on a warm summer day as the sun is setting is wonderful anywhere in the world, but nothing compares to where one was raised doing it, and in my case it was the Delta.

My parents loved the outdoors and introduced me to it at a very young age. But they never were bird-watchers, nor did they ever become bird-watchers. Bird-watching for me was a byproduct of living in the Delta and seeing so much wildlife while fishing and golfing with my family. In time it was what I did with my family when we were out doing recreation. It became part of my identity, not only within my family, but also within my community as a person growing up in the Delta. My parents raised me within the context of Delta life. I was educated my entire formative life within the context of the Delta environment. When a farmer talks about the drought affecting their crops, it all makes sense to me, even though I am not a farmer. Because I was allowed and encouraged to spend so much time out in the Delta, the history and significance of the region is within me, and it is mine to keep, cherish and pass on. And I believe this is true for all communities and their cultures.

I have a profound love for the Stockton/Lodi area. It is not just because I was born and raised here. Americans, and especially Californians, are very mobile and relocate commonly. The reasons are many and totally valid. It is easy to become disappointed and disillusioned with one’s hometown. American communities often change too fast, or too slow. And for those that do not move away, the desire to do so is often very present. There is often a
disconnect that develops over time. I have felt it many times in my lifetime living here in the Delta.

One of the very important aspects that keeps me living here and wanting to stay here is the culture of the area. And this culture is not defined by my family and friends alone. It is the entire environment. My desire to work here, be productive, and give to the community is tied directly to the environment. And when it wanes even after spending time with my family, I just drive out into the Delta to observe and appreciate the thousands of Sandhill Cranes and waterfowl that are spending their winters here with me. On warm summer days, I witness the threatened Swainson’s Hawk nesting in my favorite Valley Oak or visit my favorite colony of the declining Burrowing Owl just outside of Stockton in the Delta farmlands, and all is good. This is home.

Not only is it important for these birds and the wildlife of the Delta to be present, but they need to be easily accessible, at all times. Without them, part of my identity with the community suffers. And it is not just because I “miss” them. They are constant reminders of my connection to my past with the region. They educate me about the history of the Central Valley and in particular the Delta. They convince me to continue to lay down my roots in this area for future generations. And they convince me that continuing to live here is better than anywhere else in the world.

When I take local people on birding field trips out into the Delta, whether retired adults or elementary kids, I am passing this legacy on. It is so important for children in particular to be able to easily observe and appreciate what the Delta has to offer them as part of their cultural identity. So when it is time for them to make a decision to stay in the community and become one of its productive members, the value of the environment and its wildlife can be considered. And when I take folks from out-of-town out on birding trips out into the Delta, I am able to instill an appreciation for not only its wildlife, but the culture that has protected and conserved it. And this in turn helps them to at the very least support the region as a regular tourist. It might even encourage them to come and make it home, just like I have for all of my life.
One of the best illustrations of birding use in the area of the project is provided by eBird. The eBird project records bird sighting reports by an individual at a particular site into an online database and allows it to be available to the public. With a data request to eBird, we were able to isolate individual bird reports within the immediate region of the project during the period of November 2016 – March 2017. The resulting data in relation to the proposed project footprint is illustrated in Exhibit SOSC-77. (See also LAND-3 and LAND-120 [intake and project overview figures].)

However, it's important to understand that eBird is used primarily by very serious birders who comprise only a small percentage of the 18 million bird-watchers censused by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (2016) who make at least one annual birding trip away from their home. The total number currently using eBird in the U.S. is estimated to be about 300,000 individuals. This represents only about 1.7% of the estimated bird-watchers within the U.S. (See SOSC-76.) For the purposes of the illustrated map in SOSC-77, the eBird reports for the project region were multiplied by 10 to give at least a minimum conservative estimate of the actual number of bird-watchers that visited the region of the project.

As you can see from the map in Exhibit SOSC-77, the region that would be affected by the Delta Tunnels construction and operation is a very significant region for bird watching, even using a very short sample timeframe with limited birding reports. The longevity of the construction—up to 14 continuous years—and the scale of the construction—the largest project on record for our region—would dramatically impact the ability of birders to enjoy much of the Delta and the excellent opportunities that it provides for world class bird watching. This project would create an unreasonable impact on wildlife and would be contrary to the public interest. (See SWRCB-110, CEQA Findings and SOC [overriding significant and unavoidable Impacts Rec-2 and Rec-3 relating to reduced recreation and navigation opportunities as a result of the project]; see also SWRCB-102, FEIR/S, Chapter 15.)

IV. CONCLUSION

The dollar values created by bird-watching recreation are rather easily explained by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service charts and graphs. One can extrapolate how many of these
dollars are annually spent in the Delta Region of the Central Valley by taking numbers from known sources such as eBird, bird festivals, breeding bird surveys, and Christmas Bird Counts. The economic value of bird-watching recreation to the Delta Region is undeniable. Of equally, and perhaps greater significance, are the cultural values of wildlife viewing recreation in the Delta. The economic value of developing and maintaining happy and productive family units within a community are clearly priceless.

The areas within the Delta where one can easily observe and appreciate birds and wildlife has greatly diminished over the past 50 years. Public access issues to these increasingly few areas are always in flux, and access has become harder, especially in recent years. The reasons are many. Some are valid and reasonable. Many are not.

Because of the negative impacts on birds and other wildlife and the impact on birding and birding tourism in the Delta, as well as the impacts on the cultural connection to a place enjoyed by residents and visitors to the Delta, this project would have unreasonable impacts on wildlife and be contrary to the public interest.

Executed on the 30th day of November, 2017, at Sacramento, California.

[Signature]
David Yee

REFERENCES
Map - Recreation Birders in Delta Tunnels Project Area from eBird Data, Winter 2016. [SOSC-77]
Statement of Qualifications for David Yee. [SOSC-73]