

## Focus

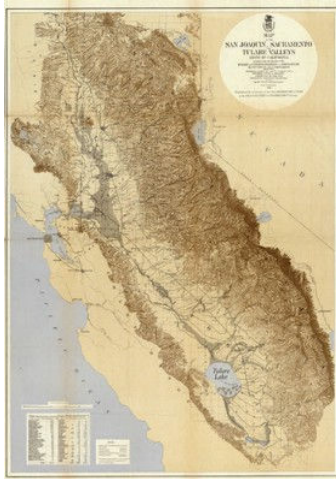
*Steve Haze is determined to restore California's long-vanished Tulare Lake, and now it seems that his dream might finally come true.*

# The ghost of Tulare

Reviving an ancient lake may help solve California's water woes

News - [From the December 07, 2009 issue of High Country News](#)

by Judith Lewis



by California Irrigation  
Commission map / David  
Rumsey Collection

This 1873 map produced by  
the California Board Of  
Commissioners On Irrigation  
shows Tulare Lake, near the  
bottom, and land that would  
soon be turned into farmland.

Haze is 59, and lives with his wife, Diane, three horses and two dogs in the Sierra Nevada foothill town of Auberry, Calif., in Fresno County. Equal parts Assyrian, Irish, German and Cherokee, he has the look of a well-fed but fit rancher, with silvery hair, tanned skin and black smudges of eyebrows. He has been involved in the Central Valley's water issues since he semi-retired from the high-tech industry eight years ago.

He has worked with the California Bay-Delta Authority on public education and job creation, headed the Upper San Joaquin River Stewardship Council and served on the boards of tribal associations, trail councils and community nonprofits. He sees himself as a liaison between corporate agriculture and progressive water activists, and takes issue with some of his allies' more combative tactics.

"The way I was brought up professionally," Haze says, "you never say no. You listen to everyone's needs and try to meet them at least halfway. I don't have to agree with somebody to like them."

Restoring Tulare Lake, he says, is the one solution to California's water woes that could satisfy farmer and fisherman alike. Haze envisions the lake as a shifting mosaic of restored wetlands that save up water during the region's cataclysmic wet years, and then serve as a "distribution hub" for local irrigation water, connected to the California Aqueduct, which already transports water from the Sierras to various reservoirs in the south.

Some of the stored water would percolate into the groundwater and could help with the area's historic subsidence problems. "It's just a matter of changing the water distribution scheme to a regional model," Haze says.

The Central Valley already has a water-distribution hub: the Delta, hundreds of miles west of the farms it irrigates. Deprived of natural river flows and drained by greedy pumps that feed state water projects, the area's delicate ecosystem has virtually collapsed, almost obliterating a politicized little fish called the Delta smelt.

Court-ordered reductions in water deliveries to protect the endangered smelt infuriated water district managers, who accused the government of favoring a fish over farmers and their employees. U.S. Rep. Jim Costa, a Democrat who represents some of the poorest parts of the San Joaquin Valley, has even blamed the Endangered Species Act for the region's enduring poverty.

That kind of agribusiness-cozy talk has provoked Haze to challenge Costa in the 2010 Democratic primary. Haze has run for office before: In 2006, he challenged Republican Congressman Devin Nunes in a neighboring district and got more than 30 percent of the vote. He stands a better chance against Costa: The chair of the Fresno County Democratic Central Committee, Gary Alford, endorsed him early, and leaders in the Latino Democrats of Tulare County and the Tulare County Democrats soon followed.

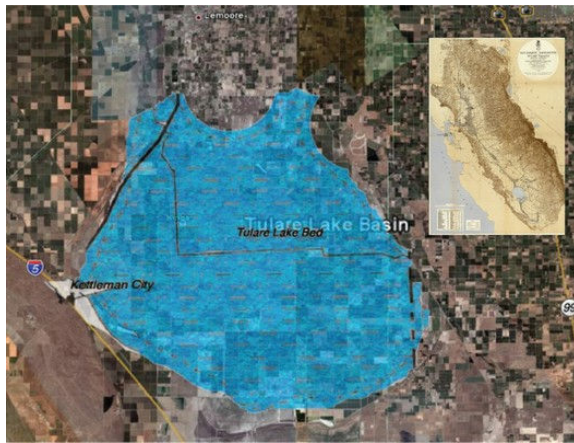
"Everybody's talking about the Delta smelt as if that's where all the farmers' troubles started," Haze says. "But we've always had droughts. This area has always looked like a developing country, there's so much poverty.

"The Delta smelt is a red herring," Haze says. "This isn't about fish versus people. It's about securing the sustainability of this whole network of watersheds, from the Sierras to the Delta. It's about looking after the Delta farmers. Did you know they have a \$4 billion economy on a half-million acres? And those are fertile acres, too. Not salt-laced ones like you have in the Central Valley." (Irrigation in some areas has released chemicals like selenium, arsenic and boron from the soil.)

Haze did not originate the notion of restoring Tulare Lake; environmental groups and think tanks have been talking about it for decades. The nonprofit Tulare Basin Wildlife Partners has already begun a piecemeal remediation of wetlands and sloughs, and is working to preserve the one creek that still runs unimpeded from the Sierras to the basin.

Preston, now a geology professor at California Polytechnic University in San Luis Obispo, hypothesizes that nature will reclaim the lake as climatic shifts bring more floods. (The basin last filled during the winter storms of 1997, which also busted levees in the Delta. Preston was delighted; the growers were not.)

But it's the feasibility study Haze completed last year that both the California Democratic Council and the California State Grange, a 137-year-old farmers' advocacy group, quoted when they endorsed the plan. In that study, Haze's team of engineers, hydrologists and economists argue that returning water to Tulare Lake would cost \$1.3 billion -- a fifth as much as a proposed dam that would capture flows from the Upper San Joaquin River at Temperance Flat. It would also store twice as much water.



Courtesy Steve Haze, sjvwf.org, California Irrigation Commission map courtesy David Rumsey Collection

Artist's conception of a restored Tulare Lake, with original Tulare map inset.

Bringing back Tulare Lake still seems like a pipe dream to some. Ron Jacobsma, general manager of the Friant Water Users' Authority, which represents farmers on the east side of the San Joaquin Valley, holds that existing channels can't transfer water into the lake basin fast enough during wet years, when flows overwhelm canals all over the state. "That's quite frankly the problem with a lot of storage sites," he says. "The plumbing is less than ideal." He would prefer holding water up someplace where it could later be distributed not only to Friant's users but to urban water districts in Southern California.

But other developments may work in Tulare Lake's favor. The opening of global markets has caused domestic cotton prices to plummet, and since J.G. Boswell II died last April at 86, Haze says that the mild protests against the lake restoration that came from his company have quieted. (As of press time, the Boswell Company had not returned calls for comment.)

Westlake Farms, once one of the basin's largest cotton growers, stopped growing cotton altogether in 2001, and has worked with the state on restoring 640 of its agricultural acres as wetlands. And one part of an epic water bill that Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed in early November instructs the state to construct more water storage during wet years to buoy farmers through the dry ones. A total of \$3 billion has been set aside for such endeavors, but the bond measure still needs voter approval. The plan that won't meet fierce environmentalist resistance is the one that involves restoring Tulare.

At a recent state hearing in advance of the water bill's passage, Michael Greene, legislative director of California State Grange, gave a rapid-fire speech extolling the benefits of surface and groundwater storage in the Tulare Lake Basin. "It would move the San Joaquin Valley toward regional self-sufficiency," he said. "We believe it's the most prudent and cost-effective approach to solving California's water problems."

The hearing's chair, Marin County Assemblymember Jared Huffman, a well-known progressive Democrat and former Natural Resources Defense Council lawyer, cheered him. "It's nice to hear somebody refer to my favorite new water-storage project," Huffman said.

And Haze, who was present, came away elated. "That was the first thunderous rumble when the avalanche started to happen," he says. "Now it's time to grab on to this thing and get it done."

*Judith Lewis writes about the environment from Venice, California.*

<http://www.hcn.org/issues/41.21/the-ghost-of-tulare>