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New state schemes for water acclaimed

Major players agree on north-south plans

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SACRAMENTO — The administrations of President Clinton and Gov. Pete Wilson, working to preserve the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, yesterday proposed three plans to both salvage the delta's sensitive ecosystem and ensure that it provides water for 20 million Californians.

The most noteworthy and expensive of the multibillion-dollar alternatives is a smaller version of the Peripheral Canal, which voters rejected in a bitter north-south split in 1982. It would create a new channel to send Sacramento River water around the delta toward Southern California.

Yesterday's announcement represents a difficult consensus among traditionally warring water interests — farmers, urban water officials and environmentalists — over how to divide the most critical of California resources.

"We are marking today a milestone in the evolution of a water policy framework for California," said Douglas Wheeler, the governor's secretary for the state Resources Agency. "For the first time throughout this vast estuary ... (we're) taking into account the interaction between nature and man's habitation ... to assure that the resources which the state needs are well protected and well managed on into the future."

While environmentalists, farmers and water-supply agencies acknowledged that they had "healthy, spirited" reservations about some of the alternatives, all were supportive of the state-federal team's announcement.

"It's very exciting to think that the state and federal governments could be ... the most ambitious program for ecosystem restoration and rehabilitation that's ever been undertaken in this country and perhaps in the world," said Gary Bobker, policy analyst for the Bay Institute, a bay-protection group.

The San Francisco Bay-Delta Estuary provides two-thirds of California's water, but pumping water through the delta's 1,153 miles of channels has contributed to the drastic decline of several aquatic species, either to near extinction or to economic insignificance, as with the Sacramento River king salmon.

Fearful that doing nothing would mean severe water cutbacks in dry years and the listing of more species as endangered, a team of federal and state scientists in 1994 formed the Calfed Bay-Delta Program, which is working to end the delta disputes that have dominated California water policy for three decades. In the past 18 months, the group has whittled its delta-preservation proposals from an original list of 20 to the three presented yesterday.

Under Calfed's first alternative, delta pumping might be increased in the late fall and early winter when it does the least harm to fish, but otherwise operations would change little. This plan would cost just under $4 billion.

The second alternative would widen one of the delta's main channels into a prime area for fish to live and spawn. It would cost roughly $6 billion.

The Peripheral Canal-like alternative would move water from the Sacramento River south, protecting fish by bypassing the central delta. It would cost just under $8 billion.

This third proposal would have no more than half the capacity of the proposed 1982 project, which would have moved Northern California water around the delta and into aqueducts bound for Central and Southern California. Northerners largely voted against it, fearing that Southern Californians would dry up their environment and lifestyle to fill swimming pools. Environmentalists, too, fought the plan, but today many agree that a version of the '82 canal is worth considering.

Each plan includes extensive habitat restoration, water conservation, pollution control and strengthening of the earthen berms remain questions about where reservoirs should be, how many acres of wetlands should be restored and how much more water a reconfigured delta might yield.

And competing interests already have preferences.

"We're pleased of course that the Calfed process is moving forward, but it should be noted that each of the alternatives will not produce the same results," said Gordon Hess, imported-water manager for the San Diego County Water Authority. "Alternative No. 1 may not produce more reliable water supplies for Southern California. Therefore we would prefer looking at the second and the third alternatives."

Hess noted, too, that southern water agencies are concerned that northern agencies share in any cost of building one of the projects.

Yesterday's announcement marks the beginning of an environmental review for each proposal, which is expected to take about a year. The money for the winning plan would be spent over the roughly 30 years it would take to complete the chosen project.

Calfed is expecting to get some of that money from Proposition 204, a $995 million bond measure on November's ballot. The measure would provide $390 million to repair environmental damage to the delta. The rest of the money would pay for a number of water projects throughout the state. Among them are recycling, reclamation, waste-water treatment, drainage and flood control.

U.S. Deputy Interior Secretary John Garamendi called Proposition 204 "the most immediate and the most fundamental issue facing this state."

"Without it, we're not going to be able to move forward," Garamendi said.

Should Proposition 204 fail, said Calfed director Lester Snow, the team will develop a financial strategy to pay for whichever alternative is selected. That strategy, he said, could include using public funds and charging user fees or other assessments.

The cost is only one obstacle. While supportive in general, groups affected by each plan admit they have reservations.

"There is a skepticism, but it's a healthy, spirited skepticism along the lines of constructive criticism," said Dan Nelson, executive director of the San Luis-Delta Mendota Water Agency.