

3 Options for the Delta Now on the Table

Do nothing, build a canal, widen present system

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With their fragile truce still holding, state and federal water officials said yesterday that they have settled on three long-term options for healing the heart of California's water system and hope to make a final pick in two years.

The three alternatives for the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, whittled down from an initial list of 20, range from doing just about nothing to building something along the lines of the long-debated Peripheral Canal.

Although the toughest part lies ahead — selecting a final plan, selling it to the state's three rival water factions, and finding a way to pay for it — officials of the Calfed Bay-Delta Program congratulated themselves yesterday for even making it this far.

"This is an important milestone toward achieving a permanent solution of the environmental and water supply conflicts in the delta," declared state Resources Secretary Doug Wheeler, who joined other water dignitaries aboard the riverboat Delta King to make the announcement.

The delta, a maze of islands and sloughs about 50 miles east of San Francisco, is both the linchpin of

the state's elaborate water system and its biggest bottleneck.

Giant pumps divert delta water to two of every three Californians and 4 million acres of farmland, but in the process kill countless fish. Water agencies running up against shortages want to increase the diversions but environmental restrictions won't allow it.

The goal of the Calfed program is to find a way to improve flows through the delta that both restores fish habitat there and in adjoining San Francisco Bay, and allows for increased diversions to cities and farms. That goal has eluded policymakers for decades.

After reviewing a host of possibilities, Calfed zeroed in on three, each with its own range of possible variations. They are:

■ Existing System Conveyance — Continuing to rely on existing delta channels, possibly with new storage facilities south of the delta and changes in pumping schedules to protect fish.

■ Through Delta Conveyance — Widening or deepening existing channels to increase flows through the delta, coupled with new storage south of the delta.

■ Dual Delta Conveyance — Modifying existing channels, as in the through delta option, and constructing a canal or pipeline skirting the delta to deliver Sacramento River water directly to the pumps. A similar proposal, at the time called the Peripheral Canal and vigorously opposed by environmentalists as a threat to wild-

life, was defeated by state voters in 1982.

All three options also include provisions aimed at restoring wildlife habitat in the bay and delta, promoting water conservation in cities and on farms, enhancing the quality of delta water and strengthening the fragile levees ringing delta islands. With those elements, rough cost estimates range from \$4 billion to nearly \$8 billion.

Yesterday's progress report comes against a backdrop of decidedly improved relations among the state's long warring water factions: cities, farms and environmental interests.

The rivals declared a cease-fire in late 1994 with the adoption of the Bay-Delta accord, which required cities and farms to relinquish some water for the bay and delta, setting the stage for Calfed. There have been conflicts since — for instance, the city of San Francisco is suing to overturn part of the accord — but, by and large, the truce has held.

Calfed chief Lester Snow said he was optimistic that a lasting solution to the delta mess may finally be at hand. "There's no question in my mind that the issues can be solved technically," Snow said.

"The real question is whether people can stick together long enough to work through all the implementation issues. I'm encouraged."

One big change in the political dynamic in recent years is the growing acceptance among water interests that their demands for increased supplies will not be met until environmental needs are addressed.

"There has been a fundamental change in the attitudes of our guys," said Jason Peltier of the Central Valley Project Water Association, representing farmers receiving federal irrigation supplies. "They're saying, 'Let's deal with the fisheries problem.' There's a very clear realization that that's the critical path to getting back to reliable supplies."

A lot of people are pinning their hopes on the Calfed program, Peltier said. "This is the real thing. If we blow it now, is it another 10 years before we have the opportunity again?"

Attorney Tom Graff of the Environmental Defense Fund welcomes warmer relations with longtime foes but suspects the last battles are yet to be fought.

"The bottom line is their interests are different from the interests of ecological restoration," Graff said.