



Round two begins another canal battle

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By Dennis J. Oliver

The federal pumping plant near Tracy can siphon up to 4,600 cubic feet of water per second from the San Joaquin Delta and send it to Central Valley farms. These and other pumping plants also could be used to ship water from a canal proposed in a Delta restoration plan.

farmers renamed it "son of a ditch" during a raucous meeting in Stockton last month because it reminded them so much of the old, dreaded Peripheral Canal.

When Northern Californians defeated the Peripheral Canal in the state's great water war of 1982, some of the victors and losers warned another version of the giant ditch would re-emerge some day.

That day has arrived.

Another canal is lurking in a massive restoration plan for the Delta. Although government officials are calling this canal an "isolated transfer facility," an angry band of

Just like the Peripheral Canal, this concrete-lined ditch also would divert Sacramento River water at Hood and carry it in a loop around the Delta's eastern edge all the way to the southern end, purportedly to improve water quality there.

Although narrower and possibly shallower than the original version, this canal would be so similar in design and purpose that the ringleader of the original project is openly boasting about it.

"The canal is back, and it looks like it's gaining momentum," said state Sen. Ruben Ayala, the Los Angeles Democrat who sponsored the Peripheral Canal legislation. Although the bill was signed into law by then-Gov. Jerry Brown, it was overturned in a referendum, thanks to the overwhelming vote of north state residents.

"What goes around comes around," added Ayala, who 16 years ago was reviled by Northern Californians who feared the canal would be built strictly to steal their water to fill Los Angeles swimming pools and quench the thirst of greedy agribusiness conglomerates.

"It's a clone," said former state Sen. John Nejedly, who had campaigned fiercely against the Peripheral Canal. "There isn't any difference between the two of them," he added.

But some who support efforts to preserve the Delta's water quality, fish and habitat insist any comparison between current plans and the Peripheral Canal is both cynical and alarmist.

This time, the canal has been introduced by CALFED, a state/federal consortium of water interests representing public agencies, farmers, fishermen, environmentalists and consumers. The agency was formed three years ago by President Clinton and Gov. Pete Wilson in an effort to preserve and restore the Delta.

Last month, CALFED wound up a series of public hearings around the state to gather public feedback on three optional Delta restoration plans officials since have developed.

Only one of those three plans actually includes the new canal, and together they offer a grab

bag of extra features that weren't on the table in 1982. Whittle away those extras, however, and what shows up in all three plans are major components of the old Peripheral Canal project.

The most expensive of the plans -- with an estimated \$10 billion price tag -- features the new canal.

Where the canal ends -- and this was the plan under the Peripheral Canal legislation -- water could be drawn and pumped from the Clifton Court Forebay northwest of Tracy to Central Valley farms and Southern California cities through State Water Project and federal Central Water Project aqueducts.

"If you put a fingerprint of the Peripheral Canal on CALFED, you've got the murderer. ... If they had copyrighted the Peripheral Canal legislation, CALFED could be sued for plagiarism," Nejedly said.

CALFED officials are scheduled to decide by the end of the year whether to recommend a program that keeps the canal on the table. If that happens, and the canal ultimately is approved by the governor and U.S. Department of Interior, it still won't be built unless other attempts to flush the southern Delta fail, the officials insist.

First, for example, they would try to flow more water to the southern Delta through existing channels, some of which may be widened. They also would knock down some island levees and build new ones farther back to enhance water flow, flood some islands to create fresh water storage lakes, and consider building a short canal.

CALFED supporters, who include some environmentalists, water agency officials and business leaders, contend this is the state's "last chance" to get all of California's warring water interests at the same table to produce a Delta restoration plan that meets everyone's concerns.

They note a key difference between the isolated transfer facility and the Peripheral Canal is capacity. CALFED's canal would carry only two-thirds as much water as the Peripheral Canal because it's planned to be narrower and possibly shallower.

Still, CALFED documents say the new canal could siphon up to 15,000 cubic feet per second from the Sacramento River, compared to the 23,000 that would have flowed through the Peripheral Canal.

Current plans also provide funds to shore up Delta levees, which wasn't the case in 1982, they note.

CALFED already has launched a 25-year environmental restoration program. Last year, it paid \$85 million to begin such projects as replacing river levees and installing better fish screens. This year it expects to spend an additional \$24 million. The money comes from a combination of sources, including Proposition 204 -- a \$1 billion water funding measure approved by state voters in 1996 -- and matching funds from the state and federal governments.

"We have \$1 billion for environmental restoration -- that's a huge difference," said CALFED deputy director Judy Kelly.

There is no question the Delta is ailing.

The Delta is a confluence of the state's two largest rivers, the Sacramento and San Joaquin, and is the primary drinking water source for two-thirds of the state's residents. Delta waters also are used to irrigate 4 million acres of farmland.

Saltwater has encroached into the Delta's 700,000 acres of meandering waterways over the years because of the constant export of fresh water, marshes have been diked to create

farmland, development has destroyed much of the riparian habitat essential to wildlife, and drainage from farms and cities have brought pollution.

All those factors have led to the decline of Delta fish species, including the endangered Delta smelt, the chinook salmon and the rainbow trout; major losses of habitat for migrating birds; and the posting of warnings that fish in the San Joaquin River are not safe to eat.

The stakes are huge.

Continued degradation of the Delta endangers the sport fishing industry, discourages river recreation and lowers the quality of water some cities depend on for drinking and farms rely on for irrigation.

Like the Peripheral Canal proposal in 1982, CALFED is trying to attack those problems on several fronts, but primarily by increasing the flow of fresh water into the Delta's southern end for the purpose of protecting critical fisheries and improving water quality.

That means being able to flush the Delta with more water at critical times, without running cities and farms dry.

To accomplish that, CALFED has drawn up plans to rework some major components of state's elaborate, artificial plumbing system.

In addition to the canal, the CALFED program blueprints include several features strikingly similar to ones proposed in the Peripheral Canal legislation. For example:

- * The Peripheral Canal legislation, like CALFED, was billed as a Delta restoration project, state Department of Water Resources records show. It too sought to move more Sacramento River water into the southern Delta and to build more storage reservoirs to increase supply.

- * Both canals would follow identical routes from Hood to the Clifton Court Forebay, which is next to state and federal pumps that already shoot water to Central Valley farms and Southern California cities. The purpose of both canals is to improve water quality and increase flows necessary for environmental restoration and reestablishment of dwindling Delta fisheries.

The juxtaposition of the canal route and export pumps is what raised concerns in 1982; Northern Californians feared it would have been too tempting to use the same pumps to send vaster amounts of water south, even though the Peripheral Canal legislation included a state constitutional amendment guaranteeing flows necessary to restore the Delta would be maintained.

- * The Peripheral Canal legislation called for construction of a 1 million acre-foot Los Vaqueros Reservoir in eastern Contra Costa County. CALFED is studying options for increasing water storage around the state by up to 6 million acre feet. The options include possible expansion of the new 100,000-acre-foot Los Vaqueros Reservoir, which the Contra County Water District dedicated last month, to a lake 10 times larger. That would have to be approved by Contra Costa County voters, however, because the measure they passed authorizing the \$450 million reservoir prohibits using lake water for other areas.

- * The Peripheral Canal legislation authorized a study to enlarge Shasta Dam. One of the 12 water storage options CALFED is considering includes an expanded Shasta Dam.

- * Under the Peripheral Canal legislation, about 400,000 acre feet of water would have been stored in ground water aquifers, possibly in the San Joaquin Valley or in the Chino area. CALFED calls for up to 500,000 acre feet of ground water storage south of the Delta.

- * Under the old plan, entries to canals that feed the two major water projects -- including the canal on Old River that leads to a federal pumping plant in Tracy that serves farms in the

southern Central Valley -- would either have been moved or flushed with extra fresh water.

CALFED suggests moving the entries to improve water quality. But critics say that could be viewed as an opportunity to increase the size of canals.

* The old plan authorized water conservation and reclamation projects. CALFED's plan calls for the same things, although its water conservation program is more clearly defined and ambitious.

Sunne McPeak, who as a Contra Costa County supervisor co-wrote the referendum and co-chaired the campaign to defeat the Peripheral Canal, today is chairwoman of CALFED's citizen's advisory council and executive director of the Bay Area Council.

When the legislation was defeated, she was quoted as saying: "I feel a Peripheral Canal is an issue that has virtually been laid to rest."

McPeak sticks by that opinion today, noting that differences between the old and new restoration plans are significant.

"With CALFED, you don't lead with the isolated transfer facility," McPeak said. "You use the through-Delta approach for a reasonable amount of time, and only if you are not able to meet your (environmental restoration) goals do you go to an isolated transfer facility."

There also are those who say even if the two plans are similar, the Peripheral Canal wasn't a bad idea in the first place.

Sen. Ayala, for example, said his old bill never mentioned increasing the amount of water shipped to Los Angeles.

"I challenged people to show me where the language was that said L.A. was going to take Northern California water, and if they could show that to me, I would strike it from the bill," Ayala said. "All we were saying is don't let the extra water go out to sea, don't let it go to waste, transfer it to another part of the state instead."

Ayala said because Los Angeles taxpayers are helping foot the bill for the CALFED programs through Proposition 204, they perhaps should expect something in return.

"You've got to address the Delta restoration needs before you can talk about taking more water," Ayala said. "We're paying a lot of money to restore that Delta, a larger amount (than Northern California taxpayers). A lot of people (in Los Angeles) don't even know what the Delta is ... they think their water comes from a pipe underneath their house."

Jackie McCort, a Sierra Club representative, said the environmental group did not immediately dismiss the Peripheral Canal as a bad idea in 1982, but instead "stayed on the fence for a long time" before taking a stand against it. She has been carefully monitoring the CALFED plans and is concerned that construction of any water storage and transfer facilities -- whether reservoirs or canals -- is being offered as part of the solution.

"Why spend all these public dollars on concrete?" McCort asked. "Once you pour the concrete and destroy another part of the California ecosystem, you can't undo it."

Environmentalists say more emphasis should be placed on conservation than on fixes, that dams should be torn down instead of added.

McCort and Jenna Olsen, a grassroots outreach coordinator with the Environmental Water Caucus, said representatives of agribusiness insisted that CALFED propose an open canal instead of a submerged pipeline "because a canal can be expanded later."

David Guy, an attorney for the California Farm Bureau Federation who has participated in most

of CALFED's planning sessions, said the pipeline idea was scrapped because it would have been far too expensive. "I remember the discussion vividly," he said "It was purely a cost and feasibility issue. The pipeline was terribly expensive, as I recall."

Then there are plain skeptics.

New reservoirs and a canal built with environmental restoration in mind might later be converted to other uses, they say, such as watering new towns in the Central Valley or Los Angeles once the state's population increases to more than 50 million people. That's expected to happen over the next 30 years.

And many agree there is no guarantee a canal built under CALFED couldn't be enlarged later.

"Once they start digging, they can do anything," Sen. Nejedly said. "Once they get a peripheral canal, they don't give a damn what happens to the environment."

To discourage such speculation, CALFED officials are considering legislation, contracts or even a constitutional amendment to lock the operation of new facilities in place.

For assurances, critics should check out reservoirs around the state constructed for both water supply and flood control, said Stein Buer, CALFED's implementation coordinator.

"The operators have been very good about following those regulations," Buer said. He cautioned, however, that too much inflexibility would take important decisions out of the hands of future generations.

"We don't want to lock things in so that they can't adapt to situations which may arise in the future," Buer said. "We have to be careful not to develop assurances so tight that we infringe on the decision-making of the future."



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