

20 Plans to Solve Delta Water Wars

All proposals try to balance needs of people, environment

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After eight months of brainstorming, federal and state officials marked the first major milestone yesterday in a remarkable process designed to end the long-running wars over water in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.

Progress came in the form of 20 proposals designed to better accommodate the needs of people and the environment in the delta, a 700-square-mile maze of sloughs and marshes where the state's two major river systems converge and meet San Francisco Bay.

Each of the plans is a different package of solutions, from the relatively inexpensive — such as restoring riverbank habitat for endangered fish — to the very costly — such as new multibillion dollar canals down the east and west sides of the Sacramento Valley.

"This demonstrates the range of options that is available to meet the needs of water supply and the bay-delta," said Douglas Wheeler, secretary of the state Resources Agency. "Step one has been accomplished in a very professional manner."

The delta is the heart of the state's Rube Goldberg-like system of water projects. Water is diverted from the delta to farms up and down the Central Valley, and it provides some or all of the drinking water for two of every three Californians, from the Bay Area to Los Angeles.

The delta is also a critical ecosystem, particularly for the salmon that migrate through it on their way to and from the sea. Their numbers have been in steady decline since the state's huge delta pumps at Tracy were switched on 25 years ago.

The goal of each plan is to solve four problems: improve the delta as a habitat for endangered fish species; prevent the further intrusion of salt water into the delta; increase water supplies for cities and farms; and strengthen levees to prevent flooding.

Some ideas are common to all the plans. For example, each includes restoration of wildlife habitat, water conservation projects, fish screens on water pumps and emergency measures to deal with newly introduced species.

Many plans also involve more ambitious water projects, such as new canals and reservoirs, which are anathema to environmentalists. Among the more dramatic solutions on the table:

- Construction of an additional storage reservoir south of the delta to capture more water during wet years.

- Building a new canal along the Sierra foothills from Lake Oroville in Butte County to Kern County to provide water for farms and fisheries.

- Creating a chain of lakes in the Delta by pumping water over the levees onto the islands. The lakes would increase water storage capacity and add to the total wetlands habitat.

Not included among the 20 plans is a peripheral canal, which would take water from the Sacramento River above the delta and channel it south. The canal was defeated by voters in a bitter 1982 election. The plans, however, do include scaled down versions of the canal.

Environmentalists, who have

opposed major water projects, said that for now they are neither endorsing nor ruling out any option. And they praised the process for including a strong environmental element.

"We've seen a positive reception to ideas of ecological restoration on a large scale," said David Behar, executive director of the Bay Institute. "The fact that that is on the table is very exciting."

The process of finding a common solution to the delta dilemma began in December 1994 with the signing of a historic agreement by environmentalists, cities and farmers. That accord created a team of seven federal and state agencies, called the CalFed Bay Delta Program, to draft a list of solutions with input from the major stakeholders.

Through a series of public workshops, the program's next step is to narrow the number of plans down to eight to 12 by the third week of March and to produce a short list of three alternative plans by late May. Those will then undergo more extensive environmental review.