

Water plan unveiled, attacked

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SACRAMENTO Gov. Pete Wilson and Clinton administration officials pleaded Monday with the traditional enemies in California's water wars to hold their fire as officials gingerly unveiled a potentially explosive report on how to end the state's chronic water shortages.

They weren't entirely successful.

Environmentalists immediately attacked the report for relying too heavily on dams and other facilities and not doing enough to force farmers to cut back on their use of irrigation water.

However, the initial response from agricultural and urban water agencies generally was positive.

"This is very important to Kern County," said Tom Clark, manager of the Kern County Water Agency.

Those reactions came as a state-federal organization known as CAL-FED released a draft environmental impact report outlining three alternative proposals to soften or eliminate the blows to the economy and the environment from periodic droughts.

It focuses largely on changing the way water flows through the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, the hub of the state's major water systems as well as a crucial ecosystem for threatened fish species.

Kern County farmers have been among the hardest hit in recent years as droughts and environmental restrictions have cut back deliveries by the State Water Project, just the kind of problems the CAL-FED process is designed to solve.

CAL-FED officials said the four-year planning process, scheduled to culminate in the selection of a preferred alternative by December, is the largest effort to restore an ecological system undertaken in the history of the world.

But officials could not conceal their nervousness over the fact that one of the three alternatives calls for a new canal to route water around the Delta entirely.

It is a smaller version of the Peripheral Canal, which was rejected by voters in 1982 after a bitter campaign that divided the state between north and south.

The other two alternatives involve different levels of channel changes within the Delta. However, most CAL-FED officials agree the canal plan goes farthest to solving the water supply and environmental problems.

At a press conference called to stress the need for unity, Wilson and other CAL-FED supporters said the canal alternative is sharply different from the original Peripheral Canal plan. The new canal would be smaller and would not allow officials to divert the majority of the natural flows away from the Delta, a key criticism of the Peripheral Canal.

He noted the release of the report touches off a 75-day period of hearings and public comment, with CAL-FED scheduled to debate and come up with a single preferred alternative by the end of the year.

system.

"It would provide better water quality for users south of the Delta," said Gordon Hess, director of imported water for the San Diego County Water Authority.

Moving water in a channel that skirts the Delta would keep the water from interacting with drainage from cities and farms and sea water that gets lapped up in the Delta, thus reducing the amount of harmful salt and bromides the water picks up on its journey south.

The San Francisco Delta supplies the drinking water for more than 22 million Californians as well as most of the water for the state's \$24 billion agricultural industry. San Diego County Water Authority gets about 20 percent of its imported water from the San Francisco Delta.

Hess said adding more storage capacity through the construction of additional reservoirs is critical to increasing the supply. "There's a lot of water now that you could collect and save in storage for times when conditions are drier," he said.

Unlike the Peripheral Canal, this new proposal cannot move as much water from the Delta and includes a comprehensive program to repair levees, improve the habitat of threatened fish, bolster flood control measures and add storage facilities.

But many Northern Californians might still be suspicious of the proposal because they fear it would reduce the quality of water within the Delta and allow for the removal of more water.

The cost of the proposed improvements range from \$8 billion to \$10.5 billion over 25 years. Those costs will be picked up by the state and federal government and the users of the water, said Lester Snow, executive director of CalFed.

John Garamendi, deputy Interior secretary, said the federal government has already pledged \$500 million to restore the Delta's ecosystem, matching the amount the state plans to contribute.

Garamendi said the plan is "well on the way toward the development of a new water ethic" in California that benefits all interests.

Environmentalists, however, criticized the CalFed proposals as "a repackaging of tired ideas, rather than fresh thoughtful solutions."

Ronnie Cohen, of the Natural Resources Defense Council, criticized the report for asking agricultural users to conserve only 1 percent of their current water use. Farmers use 85 percent of the state's water supplies.

"It seems like an over reliance on traditional dams and concrete canals, rather than proven conservation methods," she said.

CalFed officials plan to seek public comment on the plans during the next 75 days at a series of 12 meetings, including one on May 12 in San Diego. They will then issue a report in the fall.

State officials urged water interest groups to stay at the negotiating table and help develop a solution that will solve the state's future water problems for fish, farms and factories.

"When we're brought to California's water problems for the 21st century, there's going to have to be consensus," Watson said.

John Garamendi, deputy secretary of the U.S. Interior Department and a former California lawmaker and insurance commissioner, said the CAL-FED process is on the verge of creating a "new water ethic," in which all the competing interests can get what they need, rather than depending on taking water away from other interests in order to win their battles.

But a coalition of the state's major environmental groups argued that the decline of several fish species shows that agricultural and urban users have long been taking too much water away from the environment and should be required to give more of it back.

"CAL-FED seems intent on ignoring the lessons of history," said Tom Graff, an Environmental Defense Fund attorney and a member of a key CAL-FED advisory group. He said the report is "a document stuck in reverse, a wishful throwback to the era of big dams, sterile channels and lifeless canals."

Graff and other environmentalists stopped short of threatening to walk out of the CAL-FED talks, however.

"What we want CAL-FED to do is fully explore all the conservation-based alternatives," said Ronnie Ann Cohen, an attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council. "They haven't done that."

Supporters of the CAL-FED process agreed there are points in the report that they can all disagree with, but most said the state cannot afford to fail in developing a "fix" for the Delta.

"It's not going to be easy," said Clark of the KCWA. "But now is the time for everybody to knuckle down and focus on (developing) a package that we can all support."

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