



Delta re-design

3 CALFED plans draw farmers' criticism

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SACRAMENTO -- State and federal officials studying a permanent fix to California's chronic water problems unveiled three options Monday for re-engineering the Delta, including a highly rated -- and immediately controversial -- plan to ship water 42 miles around the estuary.



While CALFED directors repeatedly said they have not recommended one plan over another yet, the report they released ranked a modified Delta bypass much higher than the other alternatives.

The state's water leaders made a strong show of support for the CALFED process and tried to downplay and distance the proposal from the hugely controversial and failed 1982 plan to construct a Peripheral Canal.

"This is not the same plan," CALFED director Lester Snow said, noting that the latest bypass proposal would carry about half as much water as the doomed Peripheral Canal. "There is going to be a tendency for everyone to pick out their favorite bumper sticker, and the people who do that are not trying to help resolve this problem," Snow said.

Attempting to show this proposal is different, Snow was flanked by former Bay Area Assemblywoman Sianne McPeak and U.S. Deputy Interior Secretary John Garamendi, formerly a Walnut Grove state senator. McPeak and Garamendi were leaders in the campaign to defeat the canal the last time out.

"The old canal was going to cut off the south Delta, and I think a lot of us have learned how Delta flows work now," said McPeak, president of the Bay Delta Advisory Council working with CALFED. "Now we are talking about improving the Delta, about ecosystem restoration and measures that were not even discussed before."

McPeak said she still supports a common pool for everyone and, in a symbolic gesture, raised a glass of water and offered to share it. Critics of a Delta bypass have said their worst fear is that the rest of the state forgets about the Delta and leaves it to the local community to restore.

Report has its critics

CALFED's latest proposals alarmed environmentalists and Delta farmers, who said they remain opposed to any move to divert water before it reaches the troubled estuary, the largest on the West Coast and the hub of the state's water-supply system.

"We're going to go to the mat on it," said Stockton water attorney Dante Nomellini, a spokesman for the Central Delta Water Agency. "As we see it, (a canal is) the end of the Delta."

California voters turned down the Peripheral Canal, which would have carried flows from the Sacramento River -- the Delta's biggest tributary -- around the eastern side of the Delta directly to the state and federal export pumps near Tracy.

Proponents say such a canal would minimize the pumps' tendency to reverse flows in the San Joaquin River and pull endangered salmon, Delta smelt and other fish into the backwater sloughs of the south Delta.

But opponents say a canal would devastate the Delta.

"The Delta is suffering from a lack of freshwater flows," said Bill Jennings, who heads DeltaKeeper, a Stockton-based anti-pollution campaign. "They're proposing diverting a larger portion of the Delta's freshwater flows before it gets to the Delta."

He said CALFED is focusing too much on increasing exports from the Delta and ignoring more cost-effective strategies to improve supply, such as conservation, pricing water at fair-market rates and retiring the Central Valley's most marginal farmland.

"It's the old fixes in new clothing," he said. "Clearly, the emphasis is on the failed efforts of the past to create new storage and increase flows south of the Delta, to increase exports. ... I'm concerned that fixing the Delta has taken a back seat to greater security for water exports."

Delta farmers were equally adamant in their criticism.

Alex Hildebrand, a Manteca farmer and a member of the Bay-Delta Advisory Council, an advisory group that is supposed to be helping craft CALFED's plans, said CALFED officials obviously favor the around-the-Delta option and have shut out the advisory group from the decision-making process.

Despite assurances from CALFED officials, the state's biggest water exporters could drain the Delta dry in a drought year, he said.

"There's no way that you can guarantee that the canal would not be operated to the detriment of the Delta," he said. "That's not only a threat to us farmers but the entire Delta ecosystem. It could become an inland sea."

if it's neglected enough."

No canal

Assemblyman Michael Machado, D-Linden, said he supports CALFED but called any option mandating a Peripheral Canal a "nonstarter" and an "impediment to building consensus on California's water future."

"If push comes to shove and a canal is built, there are no guarantees to Delta water users how the canal would be operated," he said.

A number of environmental groups have formed the Environmental Water Caucus to fight the plan. Tom Graff, senior attorney of the Environmental Defense Fund, said it is nothing more than a "repackaging of tired ideas" with an overreliance on "concrete rather than proven innovations of water conservation."

"CALFED seems intent on ignoring the lessons of history," Graff said. "This is a document stuck in reverse, a wishful throwback to the era of big dams, sterile channels and lifeless canals."

The Natural Resources Defense Council, the Sierra Club and the Pacific Coast Fishermen's Association joined in a chorus of opposition, particularly to CALFED's proposals.

The best shot

But others, including state Sen. Jim Costa, D-Fresno, called CALFED the "last, best chance" for the state to address its water problems. "California will have 18 million more people by the year 2025," Costa said. "This is about preparing for that. We cannot afford to fail."

CALFED's three proposals are a through-Delta plan, ranked by the agency as the least likely to address export or water-supply issues; a modified through-Delta conveyance, ranked high for Delta water quality but low for flexibility, water supply and exports; and a canal that would divert 80 percent of the Delta exports from just below Sacramento east around the Delta.

That means a concrete canal would be built to hold most of the nearly 6 million acre-feet of water now pumped out of the Delta for the state and federal water projects.

In an average water year, the Delta receives about 24 million acre-feet in freshwater runoff from the Sierra.

Each of the three plans would cost \$8 billion to \$10 billion, with the canal being the most expensive.

All three include a variety of measures, including construction of reservoirs in Sacramento and San Joaquin counties, ecosystem and levee improvements in the Delta, and changes in water flows to restore fresh flows that currently go through the Delta to supply drinking water to two-thirds of the state's population and irrigate 200 crops.

Each alternative will be up for public debate in a series of a dozen hearings scheduled up and down the state in next 75 days. No hearings are set in San Joaquin County.

Gov. Pete Wilson signed an agreement with the federal government three years ago to create CALFED.

He said he expects a final recommendation the three proposals by the end of the year.

It will ultimately be up to the governor and U.S. Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt to decide the direction to take.

Wilson endorsed CALFED's efforts Monday, as have three of four front-runners in the race to replace him next year. All four candidates -- three Democrats and one Republican -- declined to endorse or oppose the modified canal.

Lt. Gov. Gray Davis, one of the Democratic candidates, supported the Peripheral Canal but, like the others, has said he will wait and see what CALFED recommends before taking a position on the new plan.

Rep. Jane Harman, D-Rolling Hills, another candidate, declined to answer questions about it.