

Enthusiasm greets EIR for CalFed Bay-Delta fix

◆ Officials urge those interested in solving California's water woes to keep an open mind

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SACRAMENTO — A draft environmental report for the CalFed Bay-Delta Program — an attempt to improve the state's water supply and the ecosystem — drew mixed reactions on Monday.

State Resources Secretary Douglas Wheeler, U.S. Department of Interior Deputy Secretary John Garamendi and others,

unveiled the report at the Sacramento Convention Center, calling it the largest undertaking of its kind.

The public now has until June 1 to comment on the draft programmatic environmental impact report and statement (EIR/EIS).

State and federal officials, as well as many stakeholders, urged those interested in helping to solve the problems associated with California's Bay-Delta system to keep open hearts and minds.

The draft document itself is

not the answer, rather, cooperative discussion is, said Felicia Marcus, regional administrator with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

"This is not a yes/no or a multiple-choice quiz," she said. "This is a take-home exam. We all have to rise to this occasion to take advantage of this historic opportunity. There's simply too much at stake for us not to do so."

At risk is the drinking water for 22 million California residents and the biological health of the Delta, one of the largest estuaries in the world.

Fed by the rivers and streams of the vast Central Valley and Sierra Nevada range, the Bay-Delta is the heart of California's natural water system, supporting 120 species of fish and wildlife.

A federal-state partnership, the CalFed Program was developed over the past three years. It aims to address the over-use of water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta and San Francisco Bay — the lifeblood of California's ecology and economy.

It is the hub for a complex plumbing system of canals and pumps built to quench the thirst of millions of California residents. It supplies irrigation water for the state's \$24 billion agricultural industry.

For decades, the Bay-Delta has been the focus of competing economic, ecological, urban and agricultural interests. These conflicting demands have resulted in declining wildlife habitat; native plant and animal species becoming threatened with extinction; the degradation of the delta as a reliable source of high-quality water; and a delta levee system faced with a high risk of failure.

Even though environmental, urban and agricultural interests agree the delta is critical, they have been unable to agree on the appropriate management of its resources.

Many seemed willing Monday to come together to find a solution to the delta's woes.

Program director Lester Snow emphasized that a solution is dependent on stakeholder interactions.

"This is a milestone for the management of natural resources," Snow said.

Secretary Wheeler, who also is co-chair of a CalFed policy group, said, "We enter with no predisposition about any of these alternatives. ... The only option not open to us is the option of failure."

The report does not include a preferred alternative.

"We're developing a system that will result in multiple winners and that is new in California," added Garamendi. "It is indeed a new water ethic."

There is currently more than \$1 billion available from the federal and state governments to undertake a wide variety of projects to restore delta habitat.

The draft document represents years of effort that commenced after the signing of the Bay-Delta Accord in 1994, meant to provide a reprieve from ongoing disputes over water issues.

Garamendi said there are four major elements that have to be considered: environmental restoration, flood control, water storage for future water use, and water demand management and water marketing.

After speeches concluded, various stakeholders expressed their opinions.

"There's no question from agriculture's perspective, the delta is broken," said Jason Peltier of the Central Valley Water Project Association. "The status quo is good for no one."

"There's no question we will fight," he continued. "The challenge is going to be, can we keep that fighting from keeping us away from the table?"

He said the consequence of failure is enormous. It would mean continued uncertainty of California's water supplies.

But Forrest Sprague, aide to state Sen. Maurice Johannessen, R-Redding, expressed concern that the public comment period is not long enough for anyone to adequately wade through the more than 2,400 pages of technical information, studies and analysis, and related information.

An orientation session is scheduled at 9 a.m. Friday, April 3, at the Sacramento Convention Center, 1400 J St., and will kick off a series of 12 public hearings from April 21 to May 14 throughout the state to receive comments of the draft programmatic EIS/EIR.

Various groups also handed out press releases in response to the document.

"This is an opportunity that cannot be allowed to fail," reads a press release from the nonprofit

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The Northern California Water Association states that members are pleased with some aspects of the report and concerned with other sections.

The Environmental Water Caucus, on the other hand, had a negative reaction. The caucus criticized CalFed for not asking the right questions.

"Its documents do not provide information the public needs to make an informed choice," reads a release from this coalition working toward a sustainable water future for California.

The Environmental Water Caucus steering committee includes representatives from the Sierra Club, Audubon Chapters, California League of Conservation Voters and many other organizations.

"CalFed seems intent on ignoring the lessons of history. It's a document stuck in reverse, a wishful throwback to the era of big dams, sterile channels and lifeless canals," said Tom Graff, senior attorney of the Environmental Defense Fund, in a prepared statement.

Some feel the plan is a smoke-screen for Alternative 3.

"CalFed insists on looking back to a Peripheral Canal and a new round of dams, even though these projects do not make ecological or fiscal sense," added Jackie McCort of the Sierra Club.

The three alternatives outlined in the draft EIR/EIS include:

- Existing System Conveyance: Delta channels would be maintained essentially in their current configuration;

- Modified Through Delta Conveyance: Significant improvements to northern delta channels would accompany the southern delta improvements contemplated under the existing system of conveyance alternative; and

- Dual Delta Conveyance: This alternative is formed around a combination of modified delta channels and a new canal or pipeline connecting the Sacramento River in the northern delta to the State Water Project and Central Valley Project export facilities in the southern delta.

Selection of a preferred alternative is scheduled for this summer, after public input has been obtained. Certification of the final EIR/EIS is expected to occur in late 1998. For more information, call (800) 700-5752