

SAN FRANCISCO UNION-TRIBUNE

State water proposals include scaled-down canal

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SACRAMENTO -- State and federal officials yesterday called the introduction of three proposals to fix the San Francisco Delta and improve the water supply of Southern California a milestone in California's water history.

What they didn't say is that the most ambitious -- and some say favored -- project would look like something they'd rather forget: the old Peripheral Canal, a proposal that was narrowly defeated in 1982 after a divisive water war between Northern and Southern California.

They are so fearful of evoking memories of the last water fight that they are calling the scaled-down canal an "isolated facility." They insist the project -- a 44-mile canal to convey water around the eastern side of the Delta -- bears only passing resemblance to the old canal.

"This isn't the same proposal," Gov. Pete Wilson said.

Wilson and other officials spoke yesterday at news conferences to unveil three proposals from CalFed, a joint state and federal agency that has worked for three years to improve the state's water supply and restore the Delta's ecosystem.

Wilson said the proposals are the product of an "unprecedented coalition" of federal and state agencies, agricultural and urban water users and environmentalists.

"This may be our last opportunity for decades to solve California's water problems," said state Sen. Jim Costa, D-Fresno.

The CalFed report outlines three alternatives: make small improvements to Delta channels; make larger improvements and add storage facilities; or build a 44-mile canal with significant new water storage.

Officially, local, state and federal officials insisted that they didn't have a favored alternative, but they said the isolated facility would provide the highest water quality for Southern California and the most reliable supply.

It would also help reduce the number of fish that are caught in the water transfer

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.

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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.