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CONTRA COSTA TIMES
3-22-98

Keep CALFED alive

NO POLITICAL ISSUE has been more contentious in California over the past century and a half than water policy. Water is the lifeblood of agriculture, commerce, the environment and the quality of life for 32 million people. And it is in limited supply.

Despite the state's history of protracted water wars, there is now hope for the equitable resolution of a host of water problems. That's because the major players — agriculture, business, environmental interests and residential representatives — for the first time are sitting at the same table.

This broad coalition of state and federal water experts, known as CALFED, has been working for the past couple of years to resolve California's most important and difficult water problem: saving the Delta.

Keeping this coalition together is critical to success. But it can survive only if everyone's concerns are adequately addressed. That is why CALFED must move ahead cautiously even as it makes major decisions on how to save the Delta, from where 22 million Californians draw their water.

The challenge for CALFED is to provide adequate, high-quality water to all users — agriculture and urban — while safeguarding or even improving the environment.

To accomplish this daunting task, CALFED has narrowed its course of action to three possibilities. One would make relatively minor improvements to Delta channels. Another would make considerable improvements by widening channels and flooding some islands. The third would construct an aqueduct around the Delta. All three proposals call for increased storage of water in reservoirs or aquifers.

Widening channels and greater underground water storage are relatively uncontroversial. These projects, along with greater conservation efforts could go a long way toward meeting CALFED goals. But they alone are not likely to do the job, especially if the state's population continues to grow. The controversy arises over two elements of CALFED's proposals: building or expanding reservoirs and constructing a bypass canal around the Delta. But by far the most contentious of these is a canal.

Opponents of a Delta bypass are quick to revive the heated debate over the Peripheral Canal proposal, which voters killed in a 1982 ballot initiative. They rightly feared that canal would send too much water south and upset the Delta ecology.

But the Delta bypass idea of 1998 is a far different creature from the Peripheral Canal of 1982. To begin with, federal law requires far greater fresh water flows into the Delta to protect fish and the entire regional habitat.

Also, the bypass canal being discussed today is only a fraction of the size of the Peripheral Canal and would only help improve the reliability of water supplies, not increase volume. If the canal were part of a bond issue, long-term guarantees of adequate water flows into the Delta could be written into the measure.

But talk of a Delta bypass now, much less a revived Peripheral Canal, is premature and could derail the CALFED process. That must not happen.

By summer CALFED will chose one of the three courses of action to follow. But that does not mean that every element of any proposal will be acted upon, only that a blueprint for saving the Delta finally will be in place.

Much depends on new federal water-quality standards, particularly concerning bromate. The need for a Delta bypass or the extent of water storage is closely linked to what bromate levels are adopted.

Regardless of which proposal is selected, CALFED should proceed first with the least controversial projects such as widening existing channels, increasing underground water storage, conservation, expanding water marketing and making sure federally mandated fresh water flows into the Delta.

Then CALFED can reassess what else, if anything, is needed to save the Delta and deliver quality water to users in an environmentally suitable manner. For now, the most important task is to keep the CALFED coalition together and the process moving cautiously ahead.