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Fix the bay-delta system

State's water supply depends upon success

The public, politicians and the news media in California should be adult enough to hear the words "Peripheral Canal" without shrieking or running to hide.

We don't have to whisper the P-word as though it's something naughty. It's time to responsibly discuss the complex issue of fixing Northern California's bay-delta, because it's one of the most important issues in the state. Anybody who seeks to make political hay by exploiting past hard feelings about the Peripheral Canal is doing a great disservice to 22 million Californians.

That's how many people get drinking water from the bay-delta system. In addition, there are the billions of dollars in economic output from industry and agriculture — and the millions of jobs — that are dependent on that water. More than 120 species of fish and wildlife, along with commercial and sport-fishing industries, also depend on a working bay-delta system.

Right now, the system isn't working. So the state and federal governments have spent several years on a detailed, exhaustive effort, labeled CALFED, to fix the bay-delta. The effort has produced three different plans, and one of them includes a canal that's a smaller version of the old Peripheral Canal proposal, which split the state apart politically nearly two decades ago.

Over the next 75 days, CALFED will

hold 12 public hearings across the state. After that, state and federal officials will decide what plan to support, and that could include a hybrid plan. The price tag ranges from \$4 billion to \$8 billion over 20 to 30 years, and it would be paid through federal money and state bonds approved by voters.

How water is conveyed through the delta is critically important. Improved conveyance systems, whether through upgraded channels, a new canal or both, would improve water quality by reducing contamination from sea water and organic matter and agricultural runoff in the delta. These also would improve the bay-delta ecosystem because the pumps at the southern end create an unnatural flow of water from the sea inland, and millions of fish are killed in the process. The near extinction of several species of fish created the impetus for the CALFED project.

A new conveyance system also is necessary for water transfers, which are the sale of water by farmers to cities. This is the future of California water supplies. But without a working bay-delta system, such transfers can't be made, for risk of running up against the federal Endangered Species Act.

Whatever CALFED plan is chosen, the amount of water exported from the north is constrained by the capacity of the pumps. Northern Californians needn't worry. Southern California can't drink the north dry. But fixing the bay-delta process will allow efficient pumping of water from north to south, while at the same time improving the watery ecosystem. And that could mean a guaranteed supply for future Californians. We can't let frightened talk about the Peripheral Canal get in the way.

