

Landmark Accord Reached on Use of Bay-Delta Water

By FRANK CLIFFORD
TIMES ENVIRONMENTAL WRITER

In an historic accord that marks at least a temporary end to the bitter struggle over California's most precious water resource, Gov. Pete Wilson and senior members of the Clinton Administration signed an agreement Thursday to protect the Sacramento Delta estuary and provide reliable water supplies to farms and cities across the state.

Flanked by Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency administrator Carol Browner, Wilson declared that the three-year accord "signals a cease-fire in the water wars that have too long plagued California."

The agreement requires that consumers give up more water for environmental protection of the delta at the confluence of the

Sacramento, San Joaquin and a host of lesser Northern California rivers—about 1.1 million acre-feet in severely dry years and about 400,000 acre-feet in normal years.

But the agreement closely parallels proposals by a coalition of urban and agricultural interests. And it will provide "an affordable and reliable future water supply," said John R. Wodraska, general manager of the Metropolitan Water District, which delivers water to 16 million Southern California customers.

"This is really a big deal for California agriculture," said Dan Nelson of the San Luis and Delta-Mendota Water Authority, one of the largest water users in the Central Valley. The agreement has been coming together for several months, but pulling it off required a final week of marathon negotia-

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water users under the leadership of Wodraska and Nelson.

They began lobbying in Washington and Sacramento for a plan that became the basis for the accord. The Wilson Administration endorsed the plan, but elsewhere it was not an easy sell. It called for reserving several hundred thousand acre-feet less water for environmental needs in critically dry years than was being recommended by federal officials.

Some of the same environmentalists who ultimately signed the accord argued that the coalition's plan would lead to the extinction of endangered fish.

But the Republican Party's triumph in the November election changed the political environment in such a dramatic way that the coalition's proposal, with some modification, began to look like the best deal that might be struck on the delta.

Nelson pointed out that it was a fragile coalition and that if all sides could not come to an agreement fairly quickly, many in the agricultural community might opt for a more drastic strategy, betting on the ability of the new Republican majority to gut the Endangered Species Act.

For federal officials to endorse the plan, they had to find a credible way to back away from the theory that it was necessary to leave an additional 1.4 million acre-feet of water in the delta in dry years.

According to the theory, it would take that much water, pushing fish downstream through the delta, to overcome the powerful draw of the giant diversion pumps that kill fish in the process of capturing water for urban and agricultural consumption.

The coalition of agricultural and urban water agencies argued that the strong tidal pull was enough to offset the influence of the pumps.

In the end, federal officials took the position that there was not adequate scientific evidence to justify either theory. At the same time, negotiators sought to make the coalition approach more palatable by decreasing pumping during the spring when downstream migrations of key species are at their peak.

The Department of the Interior sweetened the pot with an offer to pay for any water, above and beyond the water guaranteed for the delta, needed to prevent yet another species from becoming endangered.

"This says the federal government is at risk for the cost of any additional water," Babbitt said.

In addition, the coalition of water users agreed to bankroll a \$60-million fund that will be used to offset a variety of harmful impacts on the delta—from toxic discharges to non-native fish and plant life that prey on native species and threaten the health of the estuary.



Los Angeles Times

Delta Agreement

State and federal officials announced a plan to restore the environmental health of the estuary that stretches from San Francisco Bay to the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

Here are the key points of the agreement:

- New standards for salinity of delta water and Suisun Bay, the nation's largest brackish marsh.
- Water guaranteed for environmental needs in the delta: 400,000 acre-feet in wet years, 1.1 million acre-feet in extreme drought years.
- No new species to be listed as threatened for at least three years.
- Increased role of the state in delta water policy.
- Water users will bankroll fund to reduce fish loss by installing screens and other steps.

top executives of leading California businesses to write to Wilson and Clinton that if state and federal officials did not come up with an acceptable delta policy, the economic recovery in California could be jeopardized.

By midsummer, negotiations between state and federal officials began to show progress on one of the most important elements in the

accord—a standard to govern how much water must be allowed to flow past diversion pumps in order to establish a healthy balance between fresh and salt water in the estuary inland from San Francisco Bay.

Meanwhile, progress on another front was being made by a coalition of urban and agricultural

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