

# State, feds sign water pact

## *Delta standards agreement creates balance*

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SACRAMENTO — While state and federal officials were claiming an historic moment in the signing of an agreement on the Delta Water Quality Control Plan Wednesday, there was a mixed reception among agricultural interests.

At the signing ceremony in the State Capitol, Gov. Pete Wilson and Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt, along with representatives of the Club Fed group and state agencies, called the cooperative agreement an unprecedented move.

For both, it signified an end to the water wars which have been raging openly in California during the course of a seven-year drought, and which have been an historic accompaniment of water development in this state.

Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Carol Browner was also a main speaker at the event.

"This is a major victory for consensus, for our economy and for protection," said Gov. Wilson in his opening remarks. "There seems to be great interest in the news that peace has broken out in the water wars."

Babbitt candidly dubbed the document as an environmental agreement, declaring it a basis upon which a California dynamic can be built. Gov. Wilson said it will be beneficial to each of the three interests involved — agriculture, urban water users and environmentalists.

"We have an agreement that meets the needs of the family, the farmers and the fish," Browner said.

Under the proposal, the federal and state water projects will begin operating cooperatively. And once the State Water Quality Control Board conducts hearings on the standards, scheduled to begin in March, the two projects will use those standards.

Striking themes of balance and stability, representatives of various agencies indicated a belief that the agreement marks a new era in state-federal relations.

Babbitt said the turning point which made resolution of difference possible was in July when the state's business community decided to get behind the cooperative effort to declare an end to the water wars.

Los Banos' water representative who signed the pact, Dan Nelson, was

quick to point out that the agreement is only a start. Throughout the presentations, references were made to the temporary nature of the agreement between the federal and state governments, which establishes a three-year period to work out the manner in which the agreement is to be carried out.

Several important biological assessments have yet to be completed in addition to the State Water Quality Control Board hearings in March.

"This is a start," said Nelson, who is manager of the San Luis & Delta-Mendota Water Authority. "I wouldn't call it a solution. It gives us a foundation to work on a balanced approach to water supplies and water use."

Wilson referred to Nelson as one of many people who served long hours and months in the negotiating process.

Afterwards, Nelson said the agreement provides a more equitable way to implement the direction of Central Valley Improvement Act of 1992 than the process which has been in place.

"This takes away the species-by-species approach to directing the Delta," he said. "It doesn't totally do away

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with impacts. But it provides for fewer impacts than would have been in place if we had not gone ahead with the Delta standards."

Nelson also noted that the signing of the agreement is only the first phase of the process, "one of setting technical standards for the Delta. The second phase is a water rights phase. "This is when the state board (Water Quality Control Board) will decide who pays how much in meeting those standards," said Nelson.

"This was a necessary first step, and it is a big step for agriculture," he said. "Up until this time, there was no set rules for operation." Prior to this agreement, he said, water agencies were operating under the CVPIA and some loose interpretations of Delta standards made by four or five agencies. Now, there will be one entity to regulate that process.

"In approaching this in a comprehensive manner, we can now more efficiently address resource protection in the Delta, while minimizing water costs to our contractors," Nelson said. "That's what we have accomplished with this agreement."

One area of the agriculture community has shown some reluctance to the agreement, those who represent historic water rights. This was expressed earlier Wednesday

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during a "Water Foundation sponsored Reporters Briefing panel discussion on the topic. Mary-Ann Warmerdam, director of natural resources for the California Farm Bureau Federation, said there was less optimism from elements concerned with water rights.

"From a water rights perspective, we've allowed this process to go forward," she said, "to give it a chance."

According to Babbitt, that portion of the document which deals with agriculture supply will provide a guaranteed 65- to 70 percent delivery of water from the Central Valley Project to federal contractors during non-critically dry years. However, when asked how those entities which hold historic water rights will be affected, he said that had not been worked out yet.

"It was necessary for us to get this step first," said Babbitt, "before that can occur." He said the water rights allocations will take place at a subsequent set of meetings.

This went along with overall sentiment expressed during the press briefing which emphasized the stabilizing effort

of the agreement between the federal and state government over water quality standards for the Delta.

"This action really does provide a bright future for California," said Babbitt. "It shows there is room in this state for a rich and vibrant economy and a sustainable environment."

When asked whether the agreement would place future endangered species at risk, Babbitt adamantly declared the agreement is one made on behalf of the environment. "The bottom line of the agreement is the protection of the species," he said. "A reading of the act as not protecting future endangered species is an improper reading."

Along with stabilization, balance was emphasized. One area of concern is the amount of water which will be allowed to be taken from the Central Valley Project for protection of fish and wildlife. The document sets a maximum of 1.1 million acre-feet for this purpose. In answer to questions about that total amount, Babbitt said the 800,000 acre-feet provided in the Central Valley Improvement Act of 1992 is in-

cluded in that number.

He also said that water necessary to protect species in a critically dry year, which exceeds that amount, will be provided for by the federal government.

"This (the agreement) says that the federal government is at risk for additional water," he said.

Regarding the legislated drought experienced by Valley farmers due to environmental restrictions, Nelson reiterated his progress statement. "It's not the end of the regulated drought," he said. "It's a significant step toward that end."

Other major speakers at the document signing were Betsy Rike, assistant secretary of the Interior; Roger Patterson, western regional director for the Bureau of Reclamation; and Douglas Wheeler, California resources secretary.

Federal agencies represented in the signing were the Bureau of Reclamation, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Services — those agencies referred to as Club Fed.

State agencies represented were the California Resources Agency, the California Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Water Resources, the State Water Resources Control Board and the Department of Fish and Game.

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