

An Historic Water Accord

CONSENSUS and commonsense have overcome the gridlock that for decades has prevented proper management of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta and San Francisco Bay. The historic federal-state water-quality accord announced yesterday is the beginning of the end of almost 20 years of bitter and unproductive bickering among agricultural, urban and environmental interests.

The standards at least minimally satisfy all interests

As such, it represents a giant step toward meeting two conflicting goals: reversing the historic decline of marine species in the bay-delta estuary through, among other things, more stringent limits on water exports to farms and cities; at the same time guaranteeing those same interests reliable and predictable supplies of drinking water and irrigation to sustain 20 million Californians and an agricultural base that provides 45 percent of the nation's fruits and vegetables.

The bay-delta estuary's water is nothing less than the lifeblood of California's economy and environment — a finite resource that has come under the pressure of seemingly infinite demands. In meeting those demands, the estuary has suffered irreparable damage, affecting fish and wildlife habitat throughout the watershed.

Yesterday's accord brought together for the first time all the various interests that have done battle over that resource for almost 20 years and demonstrated that, working together, they could find a way to at least minimally satisfy all user interests while still leaving enough water in the rivers and bays for the survival of the salmon, smelt, bass and other species whose numbers have plummeted in recent decades.

A lot of people deserve a lot of credit, especially Governor Wilson and the key representatives of the Clinton administration, Felicia Marcus of the Environmental Protection Agency and Betsy Rieke of the Interior Department. San Francisco's Andy Moran, representing urban water users, played a key role, as did many of the Bay Area's environmental advocates. Thanks, and congratulations, to all.