

A truce in the Delta

The new agreement between state and federal water agencies won't end the struggle over water quality standards for the Delta. But it's a big step toward restoring reliability to the water system and toward restoring state authority over its own supplies.

The costs of protecting the Delta will be high, for water users, taxpayers and the state's economy. Under the plan, negotiators for the cities and farms estimate that water users dependent on the federal Central Valley Project will lose a third of their water supplies. The Metropolitan Water District, which serves more than half the state's population, reports it will lose 14 percent. And that's in years of average precipitation; in dry years, the losses will be much greater.

That water will be going instead to replenish marshlands and rebuild fisheries. But while there will be definite pluses for the environment, there will be losses as well, and there's no way of predicting how they'll balance out. Because of these cutbacks in economic uses, California no longer has the water it needs to grow. Environmental demands for the Delta have thus accelerated the need for new dams and conduits that may prove to be even more damaging to the environment over the long run.

With all of its limitations, however, the agreement is a big improvement over the status quo. Two years ago, Bay Area environmentalists abandoned negotiations with the state over Delta water quality standards, preferring instead to have the feds take over the State Water Project under the authority of the Endangered Species Act. The results of that shift have been enormously damaging for the state's economy as water deliveries were disrupted in the face of continuously escalating federal environmental demands. Meanwhile, millions of gallons of the state's drinking water supplies

were allowed run out to sea, nominally on behalf of the Delta smelt, although the feds can't be sure if those fish in fact benefited in any way.

The new agreement puts strict limits on how much water federal bureaucrats can demand for their environmental projects and it prohibits listing any more endangered species in the Delta for the next three years. In future, if the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service wants more water, it will have to find its own supplies. Setting those kind of arbitrary limits is hardly ideal from an environmental perspective. But the way in which endangered species laws have been manipulated in the Delta by all sides only underscores the need for Congress to overhaul the act

The settlement marks a major success for Gov. Pete Wilson. Although he withdrew the state's original Delta plan when environmentalists walked out of the negotiations, he nevertheless continued to press for negotiations with the feds. Wilson's stance, according to the urban and agricultural water users who have the most at stake in the new plan, helped in three ways: It forced the feds to coordinate their own agencies to develop a coherent policy; it forced the farmers and urban users to recognize that they had to get serious about protecting the Delta because continued conflict between the state and federal authorities wasn't helping anyone; and it forced all sides to admit that they didn't have enough scientific data to support the demands they were making on the Delta water system.

The new deal on the Delta is only good for three years. It's hoped by that time a new federal Endangered Species Act will be in place and that all sides will have a better understanding of how this water system works and where the agreement can be improved. It's a great beginning, but it still has a long way to go.