

Big Win in California

THE CLINTON administration keeps grinding out likely settlements to some of the nation's largest and longest-running environmental disputes. It deserves more credit for the mega-deals than it has received. In the Northwest, it proposed an old-growth timbering compromise that appears to be holding, though a federal judge has yet to rule on parts of it. In the southeast corner of the country, it has helped to put in place a restoration plan for not just the Everglades but the degraded environment of most of the southern third of Florida. Now, perhaps hardest of all, it seems to have brokered a plan for the allocation among competing users of the most valuable natural resource in all of California—water.

An agreement was announced last week. The administration of Gov. Pete Wilson (R) concurred in it, as—miraculously—did all the other major interest groups involved: agricultural, urban, environmental, the wetter northern part of the state that supplies the water and the arid central and southern parts that consume it. If it holds, it will end the largest and most important of all western water fights.

Most of California's surface water is in the north; the rivers arise in the mountains and come together in the San Francisco delta and bay. The federal and state governments years ago determined to move part of the water south to reclaim the central and southern deserts. They built an enormous system of dams, pumps and canals to do so. The desert prospered. The shifted water made California the nation's leading agricultural state and sustains in the desert one of the world's most extensive

metropolitan areas. The bay and delta, however, have paid the price. Together they are or were a vast plant and animal breeding ground. But the pumping-away of so much fresh water allowed salt water to invade; spawning grounds have been harmed; fish stocks have dwindled, and some species have become endangered.

Federal law—the clean water and endangered species acts—requires that more fresh water be reserved in the north for environmental purposes. The state has primary responsibility for putting together a plan; states have traditional jurisdiction over water rights. Because the state had repeatedly refused, the Clinton administration last year found itself under a court order to do the job instead. The principal agencies involved, the Environmental Protection Agency and Interior Department, decided to coordinate their efforts—they called themselves Club Fed—and try to work out a comprehensive plan that might satisfy all statutory requirements at once and could last. They seem to have done so. All sides gave up some of what they wanted. The negotiations were helped along in part by a Standard & Poor's report last March warning that without a water settlement, the state's credit rating could suffer—and perhaps by the election results as well. The Endangered Species Act and other environmental statutes are under sharp attack. It's very much in the administration's interest to show that the laws can be enforced without the enormous disruption that their critics claim. That's just what this sensible settlement does show; it's a timely lesson all around.