

# Water war is one that will never be finished

**C**alifornia's struggles over water have resembled the ethnic conflict in Bosnia: ceaseless, bitter and incredibly complicated, involving three major factions and countless smaller political clans.

It's a war that, in the larger context, will never end. As long as California exists, there will be rivalries over water because there never will be enough to satisfy all competing uses. The best that we can expect is that the conflict will be kept within reasonable bounds and that there will be periods of relative calm.

We may be embarking upon one of those more pacific eras.

## Wilson, Clinton accord

Gov. Wilson and the Clinton administration, which had been feuding over control and allocation of water that flows through the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, reached agreement this month on overall goals.

Politically, it was a victory for Wilson and clearly reflected the results of the 1994 elections, particularly his landslide re-election and the losses suffered by Democrats both in California and elsewhere, including a Republican takeover of Congress.

California is critical to President Clinton's re-election hopes, and Wilson has prospered by bashing the White House on issues ranging from immigration to smog controls — including the federal government's threats to reduce water shipments to farmers and cities to protect wildlife habitat. Wilson had suspended state efforts to set new delta water standards last year and, in effect, thrown the ball to the feds, making them responsible for any cutbacks in water deliveries.

The tactic, when coupled with



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the voting results, worked. In the aftermath of the Nov. 8 election, federal officials became very anxious to avoid further confrontation. The change of attitude — which some are characterizing as a capitulation — followed by just days another Clinton administration rollback on threats to impose smog sanctions on California.

## Certainty involved

Wilson certainly saw it as a victory, describing it as "a major step in reclaiming from the federal government control of our water resources." Among other things, the feds are saying they'll buy extra water needed to enhance wildlife habitat in the delta, rather than seizing it from other users.

Partisan politics aside, the agreement brings some certainty to what had been a chaotic situation. All of the three major factions involved — farmers, municipal users and environmental protectionists — will have some guidance as to what water will be available for all purposes.

There is a historic shift of water policy under way, one that will reduce the amount of the precious fluid that goes to farmers — 80 percent or more now — and increase the amount allocated for cities and environmental enhancement. A relatively small shift from agriculture would increase the supplies for nonfarm uses by major amounts.

It's a shift that will occur if those involved are convinced that there is no magic elixir — such as huge new dams and reservoirs — and if the method of the shift is acceptable to those losing the water.

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