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Fixing California's Delta can be done, but it must happen now

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GUEST COMMENTARY

THIS IS THE year in which California will decide how to manage what may be its most valuable natural resource — water.

The key to that decision is the Bay-Delta system with which many people are unfamiliar despite that it provides drinking water for two-thirds of California, water for California's $24 billion agricultural operations and is home to a broad diversity of plants and animals.

Here in the Bay Area, the protection of the Delta has long been a top priority. As most of us know, the Bay-Delta system is a series of channels, sloughs and tributaries at the confluence of the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers that contributes greatly to this community.

We depend on the Delta for drinking water, irrigation for agriculture, industrial water and recreation.

For well over a century, an increasingly intense competition for use of the Delta's resources has brought the Bay-Delta system to the brink of failure.

There are four major problems affecting the Bay-Delta today. First, some of the levees in the Delta, which protect local farms, towns and infrastructure, are vulnerable to failure from flooding and earthquakes. A major levee breach would cause major flooding damage and water quality would be degraded as salt water from San Francisco Bay would rush up into the Delta.

A second problem is the continued decline of wildlife and habitat throughout the Bay-Delta. A number of species are now listed as endangered. Restoration of these species is a national policy and required by law, which results in the diversion of water from other beneficial uses.

Waste water and other effluent discharges from a wide variety of sources into the Delta have caused severe degradation of water quality in the Delta. The third problem, deteriorating water quality, has a negative impact on fish, wildlife and agriculture, and drives up treatment costs for urban water districts.

The fourth problem is the increasing lack of water supply reliability that threatens the agriculture, homeowners, businesses and industries comprising the trillion dollar California economy.

In 1995, the critical nature of a dysfunctional Bay-Delta system led Gov. Pete Wilson and President Bill Clinton to establish a historic cooperative effort to repair and restore this vital natural resource through the CalFed Bay-Delta Program.

Since its inception, this program has used the services of technical experts from state and federal agencies, along with a federally chartered Bay-Delta Advisory Council (BDAC) of public members representing the Bay-Delta's diverse environmental, agricultural and urban interests, to establish the foundation for a Bay-Delta solution.

This foundation is comprised of a set of principles against which all components of alternative solutions must be tested to ensure equity, affordability and durability, reduce conflicts in the system and avoid sacrificing one set of interests for the benefit of another.

An unprecedented appeal for public input has accompanied the program work to-date through mailings, a website, BDAC public meetings, public workshops and outreach conferences.

All of these efforts have been employed to identify public concerns and encourage suggestions, public response has helped shape both the solution structure and the decision process to date.

On March 16, 1998, the CalFed Bay-Delta Program released a Draft Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement/Environmental Impact Report that identifies three potential Bay-Delta solutions.

Now is the time, as these three alternatives are assessed, when public participation in the process becomes critical.

Each of the alternatives contain a set of "Common Programs" that address ecosystem restoration, levee system integrity, water quality, water transfers, watershed management and water use efficiency.

Each alternative also provides for up to 6 million acre-feet of new storage capacity. The alternatives vary primarily in the manner of conveyance of water through the Delta.

Alternative 1 is the Existing System Conveyance in which some improvements to existing channel configurations of the Delta are proposed. Alternative 2 is the Modified Through-Delta Conveyance in which significant improvements are made to the flow channels in the Delta. Alternative 3 is the Dual Conveyance System, which is similar to Alternative 2 with the addition of an isolated conveyance facility on the east side of the Delta. The isolated facility may be either an enclosed pipeline or an open channel, and may range from 5 cubic feet per second (cps) to 15 cps in flow capacity. The estimated cost of these alternatives ranges from $9 billion For Alternatives 1 and 2 to $10 billion for Alternative 3, of which $5 billion represents the maximum storage capacity.

Finding a Delta solution for California is imperative. Determination of what constitutes the best solution will involve careful consideration of the collective needs and priorities of all Californians.

It is essential that the people of California are aware of the alternatives and are given the opportunity to express their views before this decision is made. If you drink water, eat fruits and vegetables, care about the environment and/or desire a strong California economy, then you depend on the Bay-Delta.

This is your chance to participate in a major public policy decision. Public hearings will be held in Walnut Grove at the Jean Harvie Center, 14273 River Road on May 6, 1998 and, in Pittsburg at the Marina Center, 340 Marina Blvd. on May 13, 1998. All meetings begin at 7 p.m.

Hasseltine is a former member of the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors and the CalFed Bay-Delta Program.