

OPINION

NORTH COUNTY VIEWS

Insuring San Diego's water supply

By Mike Madigan

We in San Diego County have worked hard in recent years to maintain and improve our water supply, which forms the foundation of our economic prosperity, job base and enviable quality of life. We have learned to use our water wisely, as indicated by all of the ultra-low-flush toilets we have installed, drought-tolerant landscapes we have planted and reuse programs we have put into place.

Even with these significant actions to use our water as efficiently as possible, our lack of significant local resources means we will continue to import most of our water from the Colorado River and Northern California waterways.

The San Diego County Water Authority is acting to improve our supply of Colorado River water through a long-term agreement that will transfer conserved water from the Imperial Irrigation District (IID) to San Diego. This transfer agreement is a very important piece of the overall solution for San Diego County's water needs in the 21st century.

Another vital part of the solution is the Bay-Delta system, formed where the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers converge south of Sacramento and flow west to meet San Francisco Bay. Even though it is 500 miles to the north, the Bay-Delta provides 15 percent of San Diego County's water supply, and it has furnished up to half in the past.

Statewide, the Bay-Delta system provides drinking water to two-thirds of all Californians and irrigation water to farms that produce 45 percent of the nation's fruits and vegetables. It powers California's trillion-dollar economy and is the most significant estuary on the west coast of North America, one that is home to more than 750 species of wildlife and plants.

But 150 years of human activity has left the Bay-Delta on the brink of failure. The ecosystem has declined to the point where several species of fish are endangered and the quality of water is a concern for humans and wildlife alike. The presence of

endangered species can — and does — halt water exports from the system at certain times of the year.

Over the next few months, those of us in San Diego County and the rest of California will be asked to decide the Bay-Delta system's future. CalFed, a partnership of state and federal agencies and various interest groups, is working to develop a long-term comprehensive solution that will restore the Bay-Delta as a reliable source of high-quality water and a healthy ecosystem.

CalFed identified three potential solutions in draft environmental documents released for public review in March. Each proposed solution contains comprehensive programs to improve water quality, restore the ecosystem and Delta levees, improve the efficiency of water use throughout the state, promote watershed management and encourage water transfers.

By themselves, these programs will greatly reduce conflicts in use that plague the Bay-Delta. The ecosystem restoration program represents the world's largest such effort, eclipsing similar endeavors on behalf of Chesapeake Bay and the Everglades.

Nearly \$1 billion already has been committed to this program by California voters, the federal government and interest groups such as urban water agencies.

The water-use efficiency program envisions that Californians will save 4 million acre-feet of water annually by 2020 — enough to fill the state's largest reservoir, Lake Shasta. This program builds on efforts already under way in cities such as San Diego, where ongoing conservation means that we use 5 percent less water today than we used in 1990, even though the population has increased by more than 300,000.

CalFed's program to improve the quality of Bay-Delta water is particularly meaningful to cities. Urban water agencies are investing hundreds of millions of dollars in advanced treatment processes to guard against water-borne health problems present in water from the Bay-Delta. But even the best available technology may not be able to meet future drinking standards without the improvement in water quality from the Bay-Delta anticipated

by CalFed.

While the three CalFed alternative solutions include these programs, they differ as to how water would be moved and stored in the system. One alternative would improve North Delta channels to facilitate the flow of water to the South Delta for export to farms and cities. Another combines improved channels with a new canal that would carry water from the Sacramento River in the North Delta to the South Delta. The third would largely continue the present system of conveying water through the Delta.

These alternatives frame the debate over CalFed's efforts to date. They raise fundamental questions that Californians must answer before we can solve the Bay-Delta's problems. Here in San Diego County, these questions include: Are we willing to pay higher water rates to help pay for a Bay-Delta solution, which CalFed estimates will cost between \$9 and \$10.5 billion over a 30-year period?

What kind of assurances do we need regarding the quality and quantity of water we receive from the Bay-Delta? Are we willing to engage in a substantive debate about how everyone in the state can get better together?

San Diego County residents may join this debate about issues that will help define our state for many years to come. Copies of CalFed's draft environmental review documents are available to the public by calling 1-800-900-3587.

CalFed also is holding a public hearing May 12 at the Encinitas City Council Chambers, 500 South Vulcan Ave. in Encinitas. The hearing begins at 7 p.m., preceded by an informal question and answer session at 6.

The questions that CalFed has raised are difficult, but answering them is imperative. The alternative is to maintain the status quo for the Bay-Delta, with its deteriorating ecosystem, poor water quality and unreliable water supply.

Anyone who drinks water, eats fruits and vegetables, care about the environment or depends on a strong California economy should care about the Bay-Delta system.

We have an historic opportunity to get involved with the effort to solve the Bay-Delta's problems. Don't let it slip by.

MADIGAN is co-chair of the Bay-Delta Advisory Council and a director of the San Diego County Water Authority.