

Future of our water starts now

Decision on Bay-Delta is too crucial to our lives to ignore forum

By Roger Strelow

Over the next few months, Californians will be asked to decide their water future.

For many, unfortunately, the centerpiece of that decision — California's Bay-Delta ecosystem — means virtually nothing. Many people have never heard of the Bay-Delta, despite the fact that it is home to plants and animals found nowhere else on Earth and provides drinking water for two-thirds of the state and irrigation for California's \$24 billion agricultural sector.

Vacaville residents will have a chance to weigh in on this important decision this Tuesday when the CalFed Bay-Delta Program holds a public hearing at 7 p.m. in the Opera House, 560 Main St., preceded by an informal question and answer session at 6 p.m.

It is certainly time to focus on the Bay-Delta, a series of channels and tributaries between San Francisco and Sacramento which offer a major environmental oasis, and substantially affects our local and state economy.

As a result of a decades-long struggle among various competing interests, today the Bay-Delta system is on the brink of failure. There are four major problems affecting the Bay-Delta.

Some of the levees in the Delta, which protect local homes, farms and infrastructure, are vulnerable to failure from flooding and earthquakes. If there were a major breach, not only would private and public property be destroyed, but water quality could be tainted by pesticides and minerals.

A levee failure also could cause salt water from the San Francisco Bay to flow into the Delta, adding more contamination to water supplies.

A second problem is the decline in habitats throughout the Bay-Delta system. Some species are now considered endangered. This situation is a sober threat to our environment. Unless the Bay-Delta ecosystem is repaired, water deliveries may have to be halted during certain times of the year to protect those species, under state and federal laws.

Land uses throughout the watershed, which have contributed to the overall decline in water quality, pose the third problem. As more and more water is taken from the system, this increases the concentrations of certain harmful compounds in the water, largely residues from agriculture.

This has a negative impact on fish and wildlife, drives up water treatment costs for those downstream users who depend on the Bay-Delta system for their water supply and can come full cycle to harm agricul-

Fourth and finally, water supply reliability, which is affected by all of the three prior factors, also has suffered. For California's trillion-dollar economy, \$24 billion of which is based on agriculture, water supply reliability could not be more important.

Because the situation had become so serious, in 1995 Gov. Pete Wilson and President Bill Clinton entered into an historic cooperative effort called the CalFed Bay-Delta Program.

Since then, technical experts from state and federal agencies, along

real need for public input is about to begin.

On March 16, CalFed identified three potential Bay-Delta solutions. Each of the three alternatives for a Bay-Delta solution contains major programs to address water use efficiency, ecosystem restoration, watershed management, levee system integrity, water transfers and water quality. The alternatives differ primarily in how they would move and store water in the system.

Alternative No. 1: The Existing System Conveyance Alternative would consider storage and make small improvements to the channel configurations of the Delta.

Alternative No. 2: The Modified Through Delta Conveyance Alternative includes additional storage and would make significant improvements to the channels in the Delta.

Alternative No. 3: The Dual Delta Conveyance Alternative is similar to Alternative No. 2, and it also adds a new channel around the east side of the Delta.

The solutions range in cost from \$9 to \$10.5 billion. All of them propose an increase in water storage. Each of these water storage and transport options address a key challenge and opportunity: capturing enough of the excess — and sometimes harmful — flows that occur during storms, and which otherwise flow out through the Bay after flooding adjacent lands, so that these flows can be utilized during water-short, drought-type periods.

Such physical, structural means for addressing the problems posed by wide variability in water flows — and the consequent periodic system shortages — need to be accompanied by other measures to make more efficient use of our finite but potentially ample supplies. Such measures would include improved water-use efficiency and a free market in voluntary water transfers with procedures to ensure public notice and appropriate environmental impact assessment.

Finding the best solution is not an easy task, but it is imperative. The first step is to ensure that the people this decision will impact are aware of the alternatives and let their views be known.

If you drink water, eat fruits and vegetables, care about the environment or depend on a strong California economy, then you depend on the Bay-Delta. You have an historic opportunity to get involved. Don't let it pass you by.

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The CalFed process rests on a core principle — it will adopt no solution that would solve one part of the problem by exacerbating another.

Public input has been solicited throughout the program in various forms: a federally chartered public advisory group, public meetings, workshops, thousands of mailings and a web site have all been utilized to gauge public concerns and suggestions. Such input has helped shape the manner in which policy-makers

Vacaville Reporter
May 17, 1998