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## Opinion

# The Delta's water future starts now

By Pat McCarty

Californians currently have an opportunity to participate in their water future through a series of statewide public hearings sponsored by the CALFED Bay-Delta Program, including one Wednesday night in Stockton.

At the center of that decision is California's Bay-Delta system — a series of channels and tributaries between San Francisco and Sacramento where the San Joaquin and Sacramento rivers converge. This complex system provides drinking water for two-thirds of the state, irrigation for California's \$24 billion agricultural sector and is home to plants and animals found nowhere else on Earth.

In Stockton, local residents have done a good job of voicing their views on such issues as growth and economic development. It is now time to put that same kind of focus on the Bay-Delta, because whether we realize it or not, our community depends on the Bay-Delta for recreation, agriculture, water and open space.

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:

- Some of the levees in the Delta, which protect local towns, farms and infrastructure, are vulnerable to failure from flooding and earthquakes. If there were a major breach, not only would local homes, farms and infrastructure be destroyed, but water

### How you can be heard

- **WHAT:** A question-and-answer session will be followed by a public hearing on the CALFED Bay-Delta Program.
- **WHEN:** 6 p.m. for the Q&A, 7 p.m. for the hearing Wednesday.
- **WHERE:** UC Cooperative Extension office, 420 S. Wilson Way, Stockton.
- **INFORMATION:** (800) 900-3587

quality would be at risk. A levee failure could also cause salt water from the San Francisco Bay to flow into the Delta, further contaminating fresh water supplies.

- A second problem is the decline in habitats throughout the Bay-Delta system. Some species are now considered endangered. This situation is not only a threat to our environment, but can halt water deliveries.

- Land uses throughout the watershed have also contributed to an overall decline in water quality, and pose a third problem. As more and more water is taken from the system, the concentrations of certain compounds in the water rise. This has a negative impact on fish and wildlife, drives up water-treatment costs



Record file photo by CALIXTRO ROMIAS

**RECREATIONAL PARADISE:** The future of the Delta will be discussed Wednesday night in Stockton.

for downstream users who depend on the system for their water supply and can negatively impact local agriculture.

- Finally, water-supply reliability, which is impacted by all of these factors, has also 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 Clinton entered into an historic cooperative effort called the CALFED Bay-Delta Program.

Since then, technical experts from state and federal agencies,

along with a federally chartered public advisory committee representing the Bay-Delta's diverse interests, have established the foundation for a Bay-Delta solution. This foundation calls for all the Bay-Delta interests — environmental, agricultural and urban — to develop an equitable, durable and affordable consensus solution that reduces conflicts in the system. The CALFED program principles also prohibit a solution that would better one part of the problem by worsening another.

Public input throughout the program has come 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 policymakers develop a solution. However, the real need for public input is about to begin.

In March, the CALFED released a draft programmatic Environmental Impact Statement/Environmental Impact Report identifying three potential solutions. Each of the three alternatives 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 1**, the existing-system conveyance alternative, would consider storage and make small improvements to the channel configurations of the Delta.

- **Alternative 2**, the modified-through-Delta conveyance alternative, includes additional storage and would make significant improvements to the channels.

- **Alternative 3**, the dual Delta conveyance alternative, is similar to Alternative 2, and it also adds a new channel around the east side of the Delta.

These solutions range in cost from \$9 million to \$10.5 million. All of them propose an increase in water storage. 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.

McCarty, a Stockton-based agribusiness consultant, is chairman of the Delta Protection Commission and a member of the CALFED Bay-Delta Advisory Council.