

State and Federal water experts tap into delta spigot

By David Seaton
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ONTARIO — Inland Valley residents rely on water pumped from a delta 450 miles away.

And the delta, the state's main water spigot, needs fixing. At least, that is what a task force of state and federal water experts is telling the public as they blanket the state to discuss solutions.

The first of 17 scheduled public meetings was conducted Tuesday at the Ontario Holiday Inn by Calfed, a bipartisan group trying to strike a balance between the environment and water supply demands into the next century.

The Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta is crucial to a \$24 billion farm industry and is a source of water for two-thirds of Californians, including the Inland Empire.

But sucking water from the delta, a spider web of rivers, sloughs and canals that converge and spill into the San Francisco Bay, kills migratory fish such as salmon. And the water, salty and with high levels of bromide, is costly to clean.

Calfed has presented three solutions as representatives crisscross the state. The proposal getting the most attention, and the one Calfed officials say is the best fix, is to build a new 42-mile-long canal.

The canal solution, known as Alternative 3, would divert water from the Sacramento River north of the delta and send it to the pump stations south of the delta.

This avoids forcing water through the delicate delta system which endangers habitat, while at the same time ensures a reliable and cleaner source of water, Calfed officials explained.

It is also the one supported by Geoffrey Vanden Heuvel, a member of the Chino Basin Watermaster's Board.

"It is now getting to decision time and we need to take care of fish, people, water quality and water supply," Heuvel told Calfed officials. "I think Alternative 3 clearly gets us the furthest down the track in solving those problems."

The Chino Basin Watermaster provides water for nearly 1 million

people in the Inland Valley, from San Bernardino to Pomona.

About 85 percent of the 30 percent imported is delta water, pumped through a 430-mile-long concrete canal and dumped into a reservoir.

"We have a huge stake in this issue," said Traci Stewart, chief of services for the board.

At the hearing, most comments came from area water districts and other public officials who urged Calfed on, knowing Southern California's water supply needs protection as population swells.

But some decried Calfed's efforts — projected to solve supply problems through 2020 — as another short-sighted, man-made fix that will eventually suck the delta dry.

"A proposal for more dams and more canals will not bring better health to the delta," said Elden Hughes, a Sierra Club member from Whittier.

"We're strongly against Alternative 3, which is the most man-made solution," said Peter Cherbak of Upland, also of Sierra Club.

Skeptics want more emphasis on conserving water and building incentives for less water-intensive farming.

They are also worried how much water the people controlling the canal can take, and whether they would always run it with the environment in mind.

Alternatives 1 and 2 include enlarging the current channel that connects to the pump stations.

Alternative 2 adds to that a truncated version of the new canal for better water flow though the delta.

All of Calfed solutions include bigger reservoirs for water conservation, new screens at pump stations to protect fish and strengthening of delta levees.

California voters rejected a similar, albeit a much larger "peripheral" canal in 1982. The new, scaled-down proposal would pump about one-third as much water as the original.

Calfed expects state and local interests would split the costs, which go as high as \$9 billion for Alternative 3.

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