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Delta force

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Hearings begin this week on CalFed's 12-volume draft report on how to establish priorities in California's water needs

FEW MATTERS are so fiendishly complex and tedious in detail as the geography, legal battles and cash-driven politics of California's outdoor plumbing system, a network of ways to capture mountain rivers and ship them to places where there's money to be made. But no other issue, according to Paul Taylor, offers so many insights into why so many government programs are, like the rivers, diverted into generous benefits for the insiders the late UC-Berkeley economist called "the biggies."

But more is involved than huge subsidies by doleful taxpayers for the cotton planters who pumped their wells dry in the western San Joaquin Valley and the relentless housing developers of the crowded but water-shy Southland. The Delta of the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers is a great natural reservoir — once thick with salmon, ducks and wild geese — that supplies the faucets of 22 million Southern Californians and the flood irrigation for hundreds of thousands of acres of otherwise arid croplands.

Although billions of dollars in public investment are involved in the latest proposals for the estuary, it's not easy to drum up public interest in a 12-volume draft with a sexy title like "Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement/Environmental Impact Report." It was issued by CalFed, a state-federal consortium that includes the federal Bureau of Reclamation, the U.S.

Environmental Protection Agency and the state departments of Water Resources and Fish and Game.

The report offers three "alternatives," including a new version of the Peripheral Canal that voters declared dead in 1982. It would shunt water around the Delta's complex of sloughs into the California Aqueduct and the federal Delta-Mendota Canal for shipment south.

The canal again is favored by growers and other water users. But the Environmental Water Caucus, a coalition of more than a dozen organizations from United Anglers to the Audubon Society, says the planners rely too much on concrete and not enough on conservation. They insist that farmers and cities pay costs of further canal and dam construction while costs of environmental restoration are "considered compensation for past damage."

Next is a series of public hearings, all at 7 p.m., that begin Tuesday in the Los Angeles suburb of Ontario. They continue Wednesday at the Ramada Inn in Fresno and Thursday at the Oakland Masonic Center, 3903 Broadway; next week in Burbank, Bakersfield and Santa Cruz; the week of May 4 in Irvine, Walnut Grove and Chico; and the week of May 11 in San Diego, Pittsburg and Redding.

CalFed's draft report begins with a bleak but apt quote from Vaclav Havel, president of the Czech Republic: "Either we have hope within us, or we don't." Let the hearings begin. We have hope.