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EDITORIALS

Armistice in the water wars?

■ Calfed presents a rare chance at consensus in the Valley and the state.

The outcome of the Calfed process, an extraordinary coalition of government agencies, cities, farmers and environmentalists, is especially crucial for Fresno and the San Joaquin Valley. Calfed seeks to build a consensus where competing water demands have always prevented one.

For wildlife, the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta is the largest estuary on the West Coast. For 22 million Californians, the Delta is a source of drinking water. For San Joaquin Valley farmers on millions of acres of land, the Delta converts desert into crops. Today the system operates to no one's complete satisfaction through an engineered network of dams and pumps and a legal entanglement of water contracts and endangered species laws. Calfed has suggested ways to better manipulate the Delta by rejiggering both water engineering and water economics.

There are three major players in this struggle: agriculture, urban water users and environmentalists. California's great Central Valley, with Fresno and the San Joaquin at its heart, is about the only place left in the state where all three live as close neighbors.

It is hardly possible to overstate the importance of agriculture to the Valley. Billions of dollars and a stunning array of food and fiber are produced hereabouts. Fully 20 percent — perhaps more — of Valley jobs are ag-related.

But the increasing urbanization of the Valley can't be ignored, either. Nor can we overlook serious environmental problems, many related directly to agriculture, many a function of that influx of people.

The consensus-building must begin with the recent draft report from Calfed. Yet in this strange new world of diplomacy, too many participants are acting like fish out of water.

Some agribusiness interests, for example, have teamed with traditional allies in the state capital to draft proposals for as much as \$400 million in bond subsidies for new dams. To some this looks like an end run around the Calfed process, which has yet to even begin to find common ground on topic of water storage.

Cities, meanwhile, are ducking the fact that they are pursuing another peripheral canal. They use terms like "isolated facility" to describe a proposed canal around the Delta to deliver cleaner, safer water to cities. Yet it is not only appropriate to call this a peripheral canal, it is intellectually honest. To have any chance of selling the idea to the public, cities must confront concerns about a peripheral canal head-on.

Environmentalists, meanwhile, are tiresomely negative, blasting Calfed as a "repackaging of tired ideas" even while forwarding no specific package of their own. Environmentalists also appear in conflict with themselves. Some envision Calfed's centerpiece as a vibrant free market system to shift existing water supplies from willing sellers (mostly farmers) to willing buyers (the government on behalf of the environment and cities). Others envision a government-heavy approach that frees up water supplies by adopting stiff new conservation laws. The environmentalists must first resolve their internal priorities and then present a tangible proposal so that Calfed can better address their legitimate concerns.

The unprecedented goal of Calfed is for farmers, cities and the environment "to get better together." For that to happen, everybody first must get real.