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Gubernatorial candidates won't wade into canal issue

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SACRAMENTO — Agribusiness leaders and elected representatives throughout the northern San Joaquin Valley agree the specter of a revived peripheral canal ranks uppermost as a factor that will define the region's future.

In an election year, it's an issue that deserves a vigorous and focused debate among the leading candidates for governor, they contend.

But don't expect to see those candidates in television campaign ads standing on the banks of the Sacramento River telling voters where they stand on water policy.

Already, three of the four contenders for governor are saying the same thing: They won't oppose or commit to a Delta bypass until CALFED, a joint federal-state agency charged with finding a sweeping and permanent fix to California's chronic water-supply problems, announces its preferred solution.

And that's not scheduled to happen before next fall. CALFED delayed releasing its preliminary study of three proposals by two months and now expects to produce the report March 16. The agency's executive director said recently that one of three options — a modified peripheral canal — would likely emerge as the favored plan, but CALFED put off finalizing a decision until October or later.

The proposal is to take up to 80 percent of the fresh runoff below Sacramento and transport it around the Delta to be exported south or to the Bay Area. An early CALFED report says the canal would be the most efficient way to develop greater, cleaner water supplies for the state.

CALFED Director Lester Snowe said the delays in making a final decision are natural given the scope of the work. The agency

wants to give the stakeholders sufficient time to consider the modified canal and two through-Delta plans before releasing its choice.

But many close to the process say the timing couldn't be better for keeping the plan out of the limelight and out of upcoming political debate.

"They are going to finesse this and drag it out beyond the election so as not to end up with the furor we had with the last peripheral-canal plan," said Sen. Patrick Johnston, D-Stockton, author of the Delta Protection Act.

"It's an issue no one wants to touch, and CALFED is gamely trying to keep the water issue a technical problem, but inevitably there will have to be a political judgment made," Johnston said. "Do we put a higher price on growth in Southern California than San Joaquin agriculture? Do we want freshwater flows in the Delta, or are they expendable for water users to the south of the Tracy plants? I think the candidates ought to be asked what they know and what they think on this."

So far, they have said little.

Going with the flow

A decision by Democratic U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein, based in San Francisco, not to enter the governor's race leaves the contest to four major contenders based in vote-rich Southern California, the region that stands to gain the most from a Delta bypass.

Two Democratic gubernatorial candidates and the leading Republican candidate all say they strongly support CALFED deliberations. As Democratic candidate Al Checchi of Los Angeles said last week, "The CALFED process seems to be the right way to go about this ... It seems to have been an honest process, and I am going to tend to lean pretty heavily on their recommendation."

If the process continues to be fair and the final recommendation appears to provide the most benefit for the most people, the multimillionaire businessman said he'll likely go for it.

One of his opponents in the Democratic primary, Lt. Gov. Gray

Davis, supported the latter 1991 proposal for a permanent conveyance around the Delta and said he too supports CALFED.

A third Democratic candidate, Rep. Jane Harman of Rolling Hills, did not respond to calls about CALFED. Harman kicked her campaign off Friday in Los Angeles without mention of the issue.

Attorney General Dan Lungren, the Republican candidate expected to face the Democrats' choice in November, said he will not take a position on the proposed canal until he sees what CALFED does. In November, Lungren told the Association of California Water Users that he supports voluntary water transfers and construction of water facilities to develop new supplies.

He praised CALFED's leadership and commended the agency for a "commitment to a consensus that will be good for all our people."

"Bumper-sticker slogans and knee-jerk reaction are not going to help resolve this most complex and critical resource-management issue," Lungren said.

A long-term solution would end the environmental degradation of the Delta, he said.

But Manteca farmer Alex Hildebrand is convinced a Delta bypass will add to that degradation.

"The canal they are talking about could leave the Delta an inland sea," said Hildebrand, a Delta water expert named to the Bay Delta Advisory Council to advise CALFED.

Hildebrand charged that the agency has resisted advice from his 32-member group, excluded members from critical discussions and chosen an option many oppose.

Hildebrand said that as a voter, he is keenly interested in how the candidates stand on a canal.

Taking the high ground

Stockton agribusiness leader Pat McCarty, chairman of the Delta Protection Commission and a member of the advisory council with Hildebrand, said part of the problem is that everyone really hopes CALFED will achieve some kind of water consensus breakthrough.

"Everyone is willing to give them a lot of leeway, but I don't think there is anyone who doesn't know what their plan is, except the candidates, who now can take the high ground that they don't want to interfere."

Delta advocates say they aren't willing to let the would-be governors wait it out. Very soon now, they said, they will need to line up on the issue.

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"At the least they can look at the three proposals and say, 'I like A,' or, 'I prefer B.'" McCarty said.