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The Delta's destiny

CalFed presents a rare chance for consensus

**T**here is no road map for settling decades of water disputes in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta for CalFed, an extraordinary coalition of government agencies, cities, farmers and environmentalists that is attempting to build consensus where competing demands have never been satisfied.

The Delta is the largest estuary for wildlife on the West Coast. For 22 million Californians, it is a source of drinking water. For San Joaquin Valley farmers on millions of acres of land, Delta water allowed them to convert desert into crops.

Today the system operates to no one's complete satisfaction through a network of dams and pumps and a legal entanglement of water contracts and endangered species laws.

CalFed has come up with some suggestions for better manipulating water in the Delta so now the consensus-building must begin. Yet too many of the participants are finding the bargaining difficult.

Some agribusiness interests, for example, have circumvented the CalFed process by drafting proposals for up to \$400 million in bond subsidies for new dams. This is an old-school power play that hurts CalFed, which has yet to even begin to find common ground on water storage.

Cities, meanwhile, are ducking the fact they are pursuing another peripheral canal. They use terms like

"isolated facility" to describe CalFed's proposal to build a canal around the Delta to deliver cleaner, safer water to cities. Yet that's what it is, a peripheral canal. To have any chance of selling the idea to the public, representations must be accurate.

Environmentalists are negative, blasting CalFed as a "repackaging of tired ideas." They have no specific package of their own and appear in conflict with themselves. Some envision CalFed's centerpiece as a vibrant free market system to shift water supplies from willing sellers (mostly farmers) to willing buyers (the government on behalf of the environment and cities). Others envision a government approach that frees up water supplies by adopting stiff conservation laws.

Then there is the matter of Gov. Wilson and Interior Deputy Secretary John Garamendi, who called the governor a "venal toady" in an internal memo that was leaked to Congress last year. Wilson declined to share a podium with Garamendi at a CalFed kickoff on Monday and held his own press conference. It's hard to see how Wilson in his final months as governor can help shape the Delta's future if he won't discuss water policy with Garamendi.

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