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Peripheral Canal makes news again

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A motorist might never see them, but from the air, the elongated, water-filled depressions adjacent to Interstate 5 between Sacramento and Stockton are very evident.

Officially, they are "barrow pits" that supplied dirt for the freeway's construction in the late 1970s. Unofficially, they are the beginnings of a never-completed, 43-mile-long, manmade river that was to divert water out of the Sacramento River and take it around the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta to the head of the California Aqueduct near Tracy.

It was to be the Peripheral Canal, the final link in the state's historic scheme to transport Northern California water to the thirsty millions in arid Southern California. The Peripheral Canal was promoted aggressively during the governorships of Democrat Pat Brown and Republican Ronald Reagan, but it fell to Brown's son and Reagan's successor, Jerry Brown, to either dig it or pull the plug.

The younger Brown's administration, liberally staffed with environmental activists, studied alternatives and concluded that the Peripheral Canal would be the best one to increase water deliveries and protect the Delta's water quality from further degradation by the powerful pumps that pulled water into the aqueduct.

But Brown hit a wall of opposition as he launched a years-long effort to win legislative approval for the Peripheral Canal. Originally, it enjoyed support of environmental groups such as the Sierra Club, but environmentalists eventually reversed themselves and created a strange-bedfellows alliance with some Central Valley farmers in opposition.

While environmentalists worried about the canal's capacity for shipping ever-larger amounts of water southward, farmers were unhappy that the scheme provided too much environmental protection and not enough water. With Southern California interests as his chief allies, Brown finally won legislative approval, but opponents

quickly qualified a referendum to challenge the project and in 1982, voters rejected the project.

Fast-forward a decade. The governor is Republican Pete Wilson and he proposes to rekindle the water debate. In 1994, he and Democratic President Bill Clinton jointly create a multiagency, state-federal task force dubbed "CALFED" to conduct another review of the interrelated Delta water supply and quality issues and flood protection and recommend a solution.

The task force unveiled its three alternatives, and, to one's surprise, they are exactly what they were a quarter-century ago: continue to suck water through the Delta, try to create a better channel for water flow through the Delta or build an "Open Channel Isolated Facility" - the old Peripheral Canal with a new and more convoluted moniker.

It is a 3,500-page, nearly foot-thick report that implies the same conclusion that Jerry Brown's water advisers reached - a Peripheral Canal probably is the best approach, albeit with some changes to smooth off its rougher political edges. The other two alternatives were tossed into the mix for the sake of appearing to be neutral, but the preference, which no one will admit, is clear.

If, as many assume, the final task force choice later this year is for the renamed Peripheral Canal, it probably will reignite the old debate. But will it end in the same stalemate?

"This may be our last opportunity for decades to solve the water problems of California," says state Sen. Jim Costa, D-Fresno, who represents parts of Kern County. "The last best chance to address our long-term water needs."

The next governor, whoever he or she may be, will be confronted almost immediately with the most important issue facing the state as it lurches toward the 21st century and a population destined to climb to 50 million and beyond.

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