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Peripheral Canal fears



CONTRA COSTA COUNTY supervisors' aversion to another Peripheral Canal is understandable. But they should not allow fears of a repeat of the 1982 proposal to cloud their vision of saving the Delta while providing dependable water supplies for urban and agricultural use.

Nor should they allow memories of the Peripheral Canal political war to derail the delicate CalFed process that has brought a wide spectrum of competing and often uncooperative water interests to a single table.

The fact is that no one is proposing anything like the massive Peripheral Canal that voters rejected in 1982, by margins close to 10-1 in the Bay Area. That proposal would have diverted huge amounts of fresh water from entering the Delta and would have increased the volume of water heading south, mostly to farmland.

Current considerations of a bypass canal are contained in one of three proposals put together by CalFed. The so-called "isolated facility" is only a fraction the size of the 1982 Peripheral Canal, and it is not designed to increase water flows southward, but only to maintain dependable water quality.

Besides, in 1982 there was no Miller-Bradley Act, which mandates increased fresh-water flows into the Delta.

Even with a much smaller canal and legislative requirements for fresh water flows, Californians are wise to remain wary of any projects that could threaten water quality in the Delta.

After all, the central purpose of CalFed is to save the Delta, and that cannot be accomplished if salt water is allowed to invade the upper reaches of the estuary.

Any significant proposal that comes out of the CalFed process, whether it be a bypass canal, more dams, water marketing, curbs on agricultural activity or conservation efforts, is likely to be controversial.

However, some or all of the above measures may be needed in the coming years if Californians are to have adequate, dependable, environmentally sensitive fresh water supplies for homes, businesses and agriculture in the future.

The key to accomplishing those goals is preservation of the San Joaquin-Sacramento river estuary system, which provides water to two-thirds of California. If any water project proposal poses a real threat to the ecological balance of the rivers and Delta, it must be dropped.

Perhaps the best way to allay any fears of environmental damage to the Delta, which surely would have taken place had the huge Peripheral Canal been built in the 1980s, is to assure minimum fresh water flows into the Delta even in times of severe drought.

The Miller-Bradley Act is an important step in that direction, but it is not enough. Besides, it has yet to be fully implemented.

Water flow guarantees could be placed in the California Constitution or on a contractual basis as part of any bond measure to fund CalFed projects. Then a future Legislature would not be able to tamper with any projects that could threaten the Delta.

California does not have the luxury of delaying action on water policy. Most of its people live in arid or semi-arid regions, and population is growing rapidly. The state is expected to add another 20 million people within a generation.

Once guaranteed minimum flows of fresh water into the Delta are established, then it will be a lot less contentious, although far from easy, to discuss dams, bypass canals or whatever other projects may be necessary to supply adequate, dependable, safe water to all Californians.

With better conservation methods by residents and businesses, more water recycling, more efficient use of water by agriculture and some imagination, meeting California's water demands need not pose a threat to the environment. In fact, it must not.

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