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Water Enough for Fish, Farms and Drinking?

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Today's agreement marks a victory in California's long-standing water wars

GOV. GRAY DAVIS and Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt are expected today to announce an historic agreement on an action plan for progressive management of California's water resources. This agreement signals a new era of cooperation and commitment against the backdrop of California's long-standing water wars.

The most immediately affected stakeholders include agricultural interests, urban users, environmentalists, business, labor, local government, strives and social equity organizations. Nonetheless, all Californians have an enormous stake in the accord. This plan sets forth a framework for achieving a workable, balanced and integrated solution for restoring the Bay-Delta ecosystem while also assuring water supply reliability and quality for the Bay Area and throughout California. It is environmentally responsible and economically sound.

This agreement also sets the stage for finalizing the requisite legal documents later this year and concluding the current planning phase of the CalFed Bay-Delta program. CalFed is a unique state-federal partnership that was launched more than five years ago to restore the health of the Bay-Delta ecosystem. The Bay Area Council and the business community statewide strongly urged the establishment of the CalFed Bay-Delta program at that time and have since been directly involved in its progress.

Gov. Davis and Secretary Babbitt, along with their team of negotiators, are to be heartily commended for their bold vision, courageous leadership and tenacious focus in reaching this point of consensus. Water policy historically has been California's Berlin Wall, and now, almost unbelievably, the wall is crumbling.

The agreement details an unprecedented plan for environmental restoration of the Bay-Delta ecosystem and tributary watersheds. It also spells out the full array of much-needed water efficiency measures to stretch the current supply, including conservation, recycling, reuse, and a significantly expanded market for voluntary water transfers.

A key breakthrough in this agreement is the understanding that a workable solution -- for the environment as well as the economy -- includes the construction of new water-storage facilities to better manage our water resources. Clearly, current water supplies must be used more

efficiently. However, these kinds of efforts will not be adequate in years ahead without building new facilities. To meet future water needs, we need the ability to save currently uncaptured rainfall and snowmelt in new storage, such as off-stream reservoirs that do not dam rivers.

As significant as the Davis-Babbitt announcement is, there is still much work to be done. For the last six years, even as California has been spoiled by above-normal rainfall, and even as increased conservation and other measures have improved water use efficiency, water supply deliveries have been reduced and water quality has been compromised. This is a result of growing demands statewide and a finite amount of available water storage.

The plan calls for a significant amount of additional water, totaling 380,000 acre-feet, to be shifted from existing supplies to the environment prior to increasing supplies through new storage facilities. There is a serious concern among business, labor and water agency organizations over whether political leaders will sustain the commitment over the next few years that is needed in order to complete the new facilities. Each requires design and engineering work, funding, permits and construction.

In the meantime, there is the prospect of serious shortages if the next drought were to hit before the new facilities could be constructed. Gov. Davis has recognized this threat and will convene a task force to address this problem, but the final, official agreement may need to be refined.

In addition, it is imperative that Bay Area water agencies provide leadership in securing a workable Bay-Delta solution by sharing and leveraging assets to better meet the region's long-term water and environmental needs. These assets include actual water, dams and reservoirs, and delivery systems. Fortunately, Sen. Dianne Feinstein and representatives of the agencies have been making significant progress with these discussions.

Everyone who cares about the Bay-Delta ecosystem and who wants a reliable, high-quality water supply for the region should applaud Gov. Davis, Secretary Babbitt, the CalFed agencies and the many other public officials who set aside partisan and parochial politics to forge a plan for the future of California's economy and environment. Nonetheless, California residents and business leaders must remain vigilant in their demand for the wise management of our most precious resource.

Sunne Wright McPeak is president of the Bay Area Council and co-chair of the CalFed Bay-Delta Advisory Council. She led the successful statewide referendum in 1982 to defeat the proposed Peripheral Canal around the Delta.