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State, feds begin to tackle water allocation problem Raising Shasta Dam, flooding Delta islands are among proposals for more storage [excerpts]

By Eric Brazil, staff writer

...Reaction has been mixed among stakeholders in the seemingly never-ending water policy debate who have been briefed on [the plan]. Some see it as an encouraging step. Others are skeptical. Few praise it without qualification, but all are happy that Davis has decided to bite the bullet that his recent predecessors only nibbled at.

Since Cal-Fed's creation, agricultural and environmental stakeholders have taken turns taking potshots at it for favoring one side or the other. Agriculture demands more surface storage; environmentalists insist on maximizing conservation efforts before building more dams.

...Timothy Quinn, deputy general manager of the state's biggest urban water agency, the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, said the Cal-Fed blueprint signals "a profound and very good change in how California thinks about managing its water. Thirty years ago, we hadn't got beyond building reservoirs. Now there is a strong linkage between building a smart infrastructure for environmental and economic benefits linked to very aggressive demand management."

Front-line environmental players sounded more skeptical.

"All the major stakeholders are going to find things they like in it and things they don't like," said Barry Nelson, a senior analyst for the Natural Resources Defense Council in San Francisco. "We're going to measure it by the yardstick we've laid out for Cal-Fed: Does it move forward ecosystem restoration? It is rational or would it promote unnecessary and damaging water projects? . . . This process is not done."

Tom Graff, senior attorney for the Oakland office of New York-based Environmental Defense, said the proposal is a step in the right direction. But "the big weakness in this program is that they're expending more

energy, effort, water and money to satisfy the west side of the San Joaquin Valley and big agribusiness than they are to satisfy water for fish and water for San Francisco Bay."

Graff and Nelson both noted that the Cal-Fed blueprint, which will guide Babbitt's final decisions, won't become final until July.

"The big struggle will be over who gets the water, the fish or the cotton farmers," Graff said.

"There are very solid guarantees of water for agribusiness, but there aren't clear enough guarantees for fish," said Elisa Rosen, Sierra Club field representative for California, Nevada and Hawaii.

Westlands Water District, the big agribusiness on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley, sounded mildly optimistic. "The plan appears to set forth a course of action to resolve the many complex water problems facing California," said Westlands general manager David L. Orth. "We are particularly supportive of the commitment to restore sustainable water supplies" to the west side of the valley, he said.

David Kranz, water specialist for the California Farm Bureau Federation, said he is troubled that the issue of state or federal acquisition of privately owned farmland for environmental purposes doesn't seem to be addressed in the blueprint. "Habitat sprawl," which might squeeze out some farmers, is a concern that has to be factored into the state's water policy, he said.

Jason Peltier, general manager of the Central Valley Project Association, said the blueprint "is the clearest, strongest statement about the need to improve our water management infrastructure that we've seen in a long, long time."

Farmers "continue to be frustrated by the free hand fish regulators have to reallocate water and manipulate (state and federal) project operations," Peltier said. "Obviously, we're going to have some real fights through the summer as we work through the public process."

Mike Gray, executive director of the California Farm Water Coalition, said he is "encouraged that the Cal-Fed process is moving forward to a solution that will benefit all California water users. " Nevertheless, agriculture "would like to see more storage," he added. ...