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Historic water plan unveiled: Precarious balance between aiding Delta and meeting demands

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Gov. Gray Davis and U.S. Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt unveiled a multibillion-dollar plan Friday to end decades of California water wars by striking a precarious balance between wildlife in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta and a growing human demand for water.

The plan calls for improved water quality for the 22 million Californians who use Delta water and increased water supplies throughout the state. Officials plan to expand reservoirs, including raising Shasta Dam six to eight feet, and will discuss building a new one, called the Sites Reservoir, in the foothills near Willows.

But topping the list of concerns is the health of the Delta, a labyrinth of sloughs, channels and islands that winds its way from Sacramento to San Francisco Bay. It is California's largest freshwater source and the corridor through which some of the state's most threatened fish species make their annual migration to and from the sea.

CalFed, the state-federal agency created to tackle the state's water needs, has pledged more than \$1 billion to restoring the Delta and the watersheds that feed it. Officials hope that a healthier Delta will mean fewer disruptions in pumping operations in the south Delta.

The plan would restore streams and rivers, including the Cosumnes River, dismantle dams to improve fish passage and build screens to prevent endangered species moving east and west from being thrown off course by massive pumps that send Delta water toward cities in Southern California.

Officials said California is under tremendous pressure to provide water for its population of 34 million people, which is expected to grow by 15 million by 2020. Officials must also protect several species of fish found in the Delta that have been listed under the U.S. Endangered Species Act.

But Sen. Dianne Feinstein, speaking at the Sacramento press conference via a telephone hookup from Washington, D.C., said the plan offers hope. "For the first time in seven years," Feinstein said, "I can say that California has a chance to solve the water problem.

At 54 pages, the plan was hailed by Davis as the "largest and most comprehensive ecosystem restoration in the world."

After nearly six years of wrangling among politicians, environmentalists, farmers and water districts, Davis said the plan is essential for mapping the state's water use for the next 30 years.

But perhaps more telling than the superlatives and praise cascading from the Capitol podium Friday was the fact that the diverse group behind it was no longer squabbling over water.

"Not everyone behind me likes every aspect of this agreement," Davis said. "But everyone likes portions

of this agreement."

Assemblyman Mike Machado, D-Linden, chairs the Water, Parks and Wildlife Committee to which the CalFed contingent has reported for the last six months.

He said he did not like parts of the plan and that specific details were "woefully lacking." But he said there were enough incentives -- habitat restoration, improved fish screens -- that it was better to move ahead with the plan than to resist.

"It gives us the opportunity to take the next step to make this beneficial," Machado said. "I don't think we have any other option but to go through with this plan."

Still, officials are bracing for more debate as the plan's provisions are reviewed and hammered into state, federal and local laws in the coming years.

The proposed Sites Reservoir, for example, is already being criticized by environmentalists and fishermen as a multimillion-dollar project that would imperil the Sacramento River's salmon runs.

River water would be diverted through diversion dams and canals into the shallow Sites Reservoir in the foothills near Willows, just west of Interstate 5.

Richard Izmirian of the California Sportfishing Protection Alliance said his group and others are opposed to taking any more water from natural systems, especially the Sacramento River.

"We see enormous problems in building that reservoir," Izmirian said. "There is a certain baseline that nature needs and you can't take any more water than that out of the environment without problems occurring."

But others said the reservoir, which has also been suggested as a way to prevent flooding in the area, is essential for improving the reliability of water deliveries to increasingly thirsty cities from Silicon Valley to San Diego.

"Everyone from Senator Feinstein to Governor Davis agrees that we're going to need another surface source," said Steve Hall, executive director of the Association of California Water Agencies.

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