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Editorial: A good water plan But delta framework shortchanges marketing

The sprawling delta of the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers has been in trouble for decades.

Two huge water systems, one for agriculture and one for cities, pumped too much water out of it, decimating native fish populations in the process. The labyrinth of levees in the delta didn't provide adequate conduits for the fresh water, so salt water from the connecting San Francisco Bay intruded deeper and deeper inland. Meanwhile, agricultural runoff from the 7 million acres of rich farmland in the delta, much of which was drained swampland, added to water quality woes.

The state's main water spigot was in bad shape. Water supplies for cities and farms became unreliable. Water quality was worsening. And so many fish were dying that many made the endangered species list.

Early in the last decade, state and federal water and wildlife officials got together and stated the CALFED Bay-Delta Program to fix the Sacramento-San Joaquin Bay-Delta. Under the leadership of former San Diego County Water Authority General Manager Lester Snow, the agency came up with a detailed scientific and engineering document outlining how to do it.

Such solutions were fine, but with no political unanimity to carry them out, CALFED was just reams of paper.

Recognizing that time was running short, U.S. Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt, a man more knowledgeable about western water issues than any of his predecessors, got together with Gov. Gray Davis to forge the political will to implement CALFED. Last week, they unveiled their plan. The document itself mostly repeats CALFED's plans. But behind it is the power of the governor's office and the interior secretary. With that, the future of the bay-delta has never looked brighter.

The Davis-Babbitt framework also contains specific ways to implement CALFED. For example, while CALFED provides an array of water storage strategies, the framework specifically calls for raising Shasta Dam to expand the state's largest reservoir. It mandates a \$1 billion investment in ecological restoration, nearly \$1 billion in water quality programs and sets a baseline below which southward water exports cannot be cut. Most of these costs would be borne by state bonds and federal grants.

One place where the Davis-Babbitt plan seems particularly weak is in dealing with water transfers. Granted, establishing a water market isn't integral to fixing the bay-delta. But one of the most important results of fixing the bay-delta is that it could allow a north-south water market to flourish.

Unfortunately, while the framework endorses dozens of specific projects elsewhere, it says only that it will "encourage and promote water transfers." It proposes streamlined approval procedures for water transactions, but doesn't say how. Nor does it acknowledge or support current legislative efforts to reduce the high costs of shipping water through state and regionally owned pipelines.

Buying and selling water among willing participants throughout California remains the best way to ensure water reliability in the future. We need to hear from Gov. Davis, in particular, how he plans to build a free market for water in California.