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Editorial: Something for everybody CALFED: Water plan tests the ability of individuals to pursue a common goal.

By John Krist , assistant editor, Star opinion pages

A couple years ago, just as negotiations over the future of California's most critical resource seemed on the verge of bogging down, the director of the CALFED effort spoke at a water-industry conference.

As the administrator trying to coax consensus from a contentious group -- 13 state and federal agencies, farmers, rural and urban water providers, environmental groups, business organizations, even recreational hunting and fishing interests, all of them with a stake in management of the Sacramento-San Joaquin river delta -- Executive Director Lester Snow faced a challenge as daunting as bringing peace to Northern Ireland.

Traditional rivalries among the players are strong. Farmers fear that wealthier cities will try to commandeer their cheap water or drive up its price in a developing free market. Northern California, which has most of the state's water, believes that Southern California, which has most of the people, will use its superior political clout to hijack more rivers. Recreational users and environmentalists want dams removed and more water left in streams for endangered fish. Developers and farmers want more reservoirs and regard fish as a damned nuisance.

Asked how the CALFED process could ever produce a plan to manage the delta for the benefit of all those who rely on it, Snow had a deceptively simple reply.

"Everybody will get something they want," he said. "And nobody will get everything they want."

Snow has since moved on to other challenges, but the CALFED Bay-Delta Program has continued to slog along despite increasing intransigence by some of those participating in the discussions. Last week, after six years of planning, review and debate, CALFED at last disgorged its proposed peace treaty. During a press conference Friday in Sacramento, Interior Secretary

Bruce Babbitt and Gov. Gray Davis unveiled a \$10 billion, 30-year plan to balance the needs of all the Delta's water users -- 22 million urban residents and half the state's \$18 billion-a-year agricultural industry -- while also protecting the environment.

Snow's words had been prophetic. The plan gives everybody something. And nobody gets everything. As a result, the framework will provide a clear and strikingly important test of a fundamental principle of civilized society: the willingness of individuals to sacrifice some of their personal desires in order to serve the broader public good.

Put another way, it will reveal whether the players in California's water establishment are smart enough to give up a little to advance a process that could eventually give them a lot.

The CALFED plan represents a remarkably balanced approach to water planning, which explains why it has been greeted with such skepticism. It earmarks \$1 billion for ecosystem restoration, recognizing that improving habitat will improve the health of fish stocks, whose endangered status has hampered the ability of state and federal projects to pump water from the delta at critical times. Enable fish to thrive in restored rivers and streams, and you reduce the chance that Endangered Species Act considerations will interfere with pumping.

The plan also proposes heavy investment in water conservation: between \$1.5 billion and \$2 billion, to wring perhaps 1.3 million acre-feet (the annual consumption of about 10 million Southern Californians) out of existing use.

But it also recognizes the need for a place to store more water in wet years and during flood seasons, so that more will be available during drought -- the fundamental conundrum facing California.

Accordingly, the plan seeks to identify off-stream reservoir sites and opportunities for underground storage, which are environmentally superior alternatives to dams on rivers. It also proposes expanding existing reservoirs -- again, a strategy with minimal effect on the environment since those rivers were drowned long ago. Together, these strategies could allow the state to capture nearly 2 million acre-feet of runoff during the wet season, when diversions have little effect on fish and wildlife.

Wisely, the plan also proposes spending money to fallow land in the San Joaquin Valley that never should have been farmed because it drains so poorly.

It is not clear whether this \$10 billion gamble will pay off in healthier wildlife, adequate water for California's growing cities and affordable water for its irrigated farms. The alternative, however, is dead fish and thirsty people. Which is no alternative at all.