

Contra Costa Times

Sunday - 6/18/00

Editorial: CalFed takes big step

For the past five years, state and federal officials have been working on a comprehensive plan to assure safe, reliable water supplies to millions of California's urban and agricultural users, while improving the environmental quality of the Delta estuary.

For the first time in California history, disparate water interests have been cooperating under the umbrella known as CalFed. Instead of contentious political fighting, farmers, environmentalists, businesses and other urban water users have been sitting at the same table. They hope to devise a water plan that serves 22 million people, irrigates one of the world's most productive agricultural regions and protects the state's largest estuary system. Such an ambitious proposal with so many competing interests presents a costly and politically difficult challenge. That will be particularly true when the tough decisions are made on the many projects needed to make the plan work.

A week ago, Gov. Gray Davis and Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt took a major step forward toward meeting CalFed's goals. They signed on to a sweeping plan that would repair damaged Delta habitat and provide water for 22 million urban and agricultural users.

The blueprint endorsed by Babbitt and Davis has five goals: increase water storage facilities, restore Delta habitat, provide more water for fish, guarantee farmers and Southern California water users no further reduction in supplies and promote water conservation. The agreement announced by the governor and secretary would cost \$8.5 billion over the next seven years, with \$2.4 billion of the money coming from the federal government and the rest from the state. That is only the beginning.

The total cost of saving the Delta and providing water for two-thirds of Californians will surely be far more by the time all the projects are finished 30 years from now. But unless work begins soon, Californians could face severe water restrictions in the near future. There have been no

large-scale water projects built in the state for nearly four decades. Since 1960, California's population has increased from 16 million to 34 million and is expected to reach 59 million by 2040. Obviously, even with intense conservation, the state is going to have to deliver far more water to a growing population.

The key to success is more water storage, both in underground aquifers and above-ground reservoirs. There is enough fresh water in California to meet urban, agricultural and environmental needs. But the flow of water is uneven. For half the year there is a surplus of water, while there is almost none for the dry half of the year.

If enough water can be captured during the wet season, there will be enough supplies for all interests during the dry months. However, to meet that goal, reservoirs will have to be built and -- or expanded. CalFed has a number of projects it is studying. It is considering building new dams on the Sacramento River and San Joaquin River, expanding reservoirs at Los Vaqueros, Shasta Lake and Friant. Also, CalFed is studying a pipeline bypass of the San Luis Reservoir, more underground storage in San Joaquin County and flooding islands in the Delta. Which projects eventually will be built has not yet been decided. But all of them are controversial to some degree, including expansion of Los Vaqueros, which would require approval by Contra Costa Water District voters.

CalFed also has left plans for a Delta bypass aqueduct, which has been criticized as a smaller version of the Peripheral Canal voters rejected in 1982. Any mention of a water diversion around the Delta raises the hackles of environmentalists. But if a diversion is to be avoided, there must be sufficient water storage at key locations along the Sacramento-San Joaquin river and estuary systems.

The next important step for CalFed is to study its water storage, conservation and environmental enhancement options and decide which projects to pursue. The challenge for CalFed is to make the necessary decisions without splitting the coalition of water interests.

This won't be easy, and some groups are sure to oppose CalFed's choices. But for the sake of California's future, CalFed must move ahead in a timely manner even if it means increased controversy.#