

OPINION

Bay-Delta solution is worth waiting for

By Michael Madigan

A group of state and federal government agencies working with special interests from throughout California has come forth with a proposed solution to the decades-long environmental and water management problems of California's Bay-Delta system.

Here in San Diego, local residents have done a good job of airing their views on such issues as growth, transportation and the education of our children. It is now time to put that same kind of focus on the Bay-Delta.

Because whether we realize it or not, the Bay-Delta system — a series of channels and tributaries between San Francisco and Sacramento where the San Joaquin and Sacramento rivers converge — contributes greatly to this community. More specifically, we depend on the Bay-Delta for its contribution to our water supply.

The San Francisco Bay/Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta is an ecologically sensitive and complex maze of interdependent waterways that serves as the hub of California's water system. It provides drinking water to two-thirds of Californians, supports valuable fish and wildlife species and irrigates farmland that produces nearly half of the nation's fruits and vegetables.

However, the complex interdependence and multiple functions that comprise the Bay-Delta system are also its biggest challenge. Over the years, competing interests have fought for their share of the Bay-Delta's limited natural resources. As a result, the Bay-Delta has been depleted, species have become endangered, water quality has degraded and water supply reliability has suffered. A deteriorating levee system threatens important infrastructure, millions of dollars of private property and water quality in the Delta.

Fixing these problems is as complex as the Bay-Delta estuary itself. Quick-fix attempts over the last few decades to address a single aspect of the problem have consistently run into roadblocks, both political and physical. The result: disagreements, delays, lawsuits and a general climate of mistrust among those competing for water. Meanwhile, the Bay-Delta continues to decline.

The crushing drought from 1987-92 escalated the problem into a crisis that could no longer be ignored. In 1995, in response to this crisis, the state of California and the Clinton administration entered into a historic cooperative effort called the CalFed Bay-Delta Program.

In the last four years, technical experts, state and federal officials, and stakeholders have been working steadily toward a solution to these problems under the umbrella of CalFed.

As the program has progressed toward a long-term solution, action is being taken to restore health to the ecosystem. Over the past three years, the CalFed Bay-Delta Program has provided \$177 million in funding for ecosystem restoration projects. In 1999, \$85 million more is available for similar projects.

CalFed's latest milestone is the June release of a report in which a proposed blueprint for a long-term solution is presented. This is no quick fix. It has required compromises and commitments from everyone involved.

A revised draft environmental document containing the framework of a Bay-Delta solution was released for public review and comment June 25. It outlines planned actions for the next seven to 10 years that will cost an estimated \$4.4 billion.

The proposed solution calls for implementation of the largest ecosystem restoration project in the nation, commitment to greater levels of conservation and recycling, enlargement of channels in the eastern Delta and other facilities to improve water supplies and protect fish, and actions to assure continuous improvements in water quality for all beneficial uses.

This report represents a significant achievement by CalFed and real progress on a decision that could mean the success or failure of California's economy and environment in the next century.

The revised draft environmental document represents four years of intense work by some of the state's top water management and environmental experts. Now it is your turn, Californians, to weigh in on the state's biggest water decision in 30 years.

Public hearings are being held throughout the state to give citizens a chance to see what this proposed solution looks like and tell CALFED what they think.

With a spirit of compromise and a focus on the long-term goals — and benefits — of a long-term, feasible, affordable solution, we may at last relegate California's "water wars" to their place in history.

That's where they belong.