



95-1 comments
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Lester Snow, Manager
CALFED Bay-Delta Program
1416 Ninth Street, # 1155
Sacramento, CA 95814

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RE: CALFED BAY-DELTA PROGRAM, WATER SUPPLY PROBLEM SUMMARY

This letter is submitted as the comments of the Pacific Institute for Studies in Development, Environment, and Security regarding the draft Water Supply Problem Summary for the CALFED Bay-Delta Program.

Water Supply

Historically Defined as Technical Problem

The Draft Water Supply Problem Summary statement raises the right issues but erroneously identifies supply as the problem. There are historical reasons for this. As early as the 1860s, there were intense pressures to build large-scale water to irrigate California's abundant fertile lands and to encourage agricultural production. Because the rain fell in the winter, not in the summer growing season, irrigation was key to the settlement of California and the conversion of the Central Valley from the "Serengeti of North America" to the world's most productive agricultural region -- a transformation that occurred with little regard for the environment. The prevailing ethic then and now has been to dominate nature and to plan for future growth by building more dams, reservoirs, and canals to transport water from areas of surplus to areas of deficiency, rather than to understand and co-exist in harmony with it. Every drop of water was to be put to work and not a drop of water was to be wasted by flowing to the sea. With this ethic of supply expansion, water planning became largely a technical exercise. The result of this prevailing philosophy was the sacrifice of much of California's natural resources, environment and biological diversity.

Current and Proposed Solutions Are Not Sustainable

There is wide agreement that the water policies that made California the world's agricultural and economic giant it is today are not sustainable nor up to the challenge of the twenty-first century. Yet those responsible for setting water policy and managing the state's public resources, including water, continue to plan on the basis of outdated and inappropriate assumptions. Water planning is still entirely based on projection of variables such as average per-capita residential demand, inefficient agricultural use, and levels of economic activity. These projections are then used to forecast rising demands and to evaluate the kind of supply systems necessary to meet those demands reliably. This method of planning always projects future water demands independent of, and larger than, actual water supplies. Thus, the problem has been, and in the draft Water Supply statement is, defined as "the supply of water . . . is insufficient to meet the beneficial uses." Planning, therefore, consists of, and is a justification for, supply projects or ways to eliminate environmental impediments to the use of existing resources. The problem, however, is not one of insufficient supply, but rather one of values, poor management, poor planning, and inefficient use of existing resources.

Solution Must Be Based On an Ethic that Balances Human and Ecological Needs

It is time to discard the old ethic of supply expansion and to adopt an ethic that balances human and ecological needs. Technical fixes to California's extensive water infrastructure, as well as use of emerging water efficient technologies, should only be part of the solution. The heart of the solution rests on our ability to understand people's symbiotic relationship with nature and our ability to manage and use existing supplies to support the ability of human society to endure and flourish into the indefinite future without undermining the integrity of the hydrologic cycle or the ecological systems that depend on it. It is no longer feasible or desirable to allow a single use or group of water users to set the state's water policy. This new ethic requires that through a democratic process with meaningful public participation we determine what desires can be satisfied with existing water resources and that we manage, plan, and use these resources to meet human and ecological needs. It is time that we rethink the role of government (our institutions and legal system) in shaping water policy and use. New institutions, rules, and ways of managing, planning and using water must be part of this new ethic. These institutions and rules must quickly, flexibly, effectively and equitably resolve conflicts over water and deal with the unavoidable uncertainties of water variability and predictability.

Planning must provide information that helps the public and policy makers make informed choices about which "needs" and "wants" can and should be satisfied. Framing the problem as one of supply ignores the real problem of improper and inefficient use of public resources and is nothing more than a poorly disguised effort to justify additional supply projects or the elimination of environmental protections. The same argument was used to justify most water projects, including the Central Valley Project and the State Water Project. Despite these massive infrastructure projects with unmatched investment of public revenues and resources (including tremendous degradation of the natural environment) California still has a serious water management crisis. As long as we continue to define the problem as one of insufficient supply and not of mismanagement and use, the gap between demand and supply will continue to widen, exacerbating groundwater overdraft, surface water disputes, water quality problems, and environmental destruction.

It is time to plan for meeting human and ecological needs with water that is available, and to determine what desires can be satisfied within the limits of our resources. This is an essential change -- a change that will require new thinking at the highest levels not only of the problem but of solutions. We have the opportunity, tools, and ability to create a new water ethic -- a water ethic that can balance human and ecological interest to restore ecosystems and protect the environment while bringing forth innovation, equitable use of resources, meaningful work, and economic security. This is an essential change -- a change that will require new thinking at the highest levels not only of the problem but of solutions.

Please contact me if you or your staff have any questions concerning these comments.

Sincerely,


Santos Gomez,
Senior Research Associate