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Peripheral Canal Foes See Another Try Environmentalists upset at revision of state water plan

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A rift erupted between environmentalists and government officials yesterday over changes in a state water-allotment agreement that could result in the resurrection of a peripheral canal, a controversial water project that has long been thought dead.

Environmentalists said yesterday that the original agreement issued in December by CalFed, a joint state and federal agency empowered to help solve California's water conflicts, rejected the peripheral canal except in the most extreme circumstances involving water quality.

But a June revision of the proposal provides for partial construction of the canal if drinking water-quality standards are not met, environmentalists said.

Tom Graff, a senior attorney for the Environmental Defense Fund, a conservation group that has lobbied for greater freshwater flows through the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta and San Francisco Bay to help fish and wildlife, said environmentalists feel deceived by CalFed.

"That language wasn't in an original draft of the plan issued in December," Graff said. "It was subtly inserted in the final draft that came out in June. . . . To say we're distressed is an understatement."

The canal is a decades-old proposal that would divert water from the Sacramento River around the Delta to giant water pumps for delivery to Southern California cities and farms.

The revised agreement states that a diversion canal "would be constructed" along one-third of the route of the originally proposed peripheral canal -- if yet-to-be-established water-quality standards are not met four years after the CalFed agreement is implemented. The agreement is expected to be adopted by next summer.

The peripheral canal was projected to carry 22,000 cubic feet of water -- about the flow of the Colorado River. The diversion canal proposed by CalFed would carry about 4,000 cubic feet of water to the Mokelumne River, where it would eventually flow to the pumps, improving water quality.

CalFed Director Lester Snow said he was perplexed by the brouhaha.

"There has been nothing hidden about the proposal," he said. "Basically, this is a water-quality issue. As we meet some of the fish enhancement and water-quality goals in other parts of the Delta, we could lose water quality in the central and south Delta because there's only so much water to go around. This would allow us to deliver fresh water to mitigate that."

Graff said the problem with a Sacramento River-Mokelumne River canal is not so much environmental damage as it is the underlying purpose of the agreement.

“I don’t think the environmental consequences would be that great, but the bigger issue here is motivation,” he said. “The real motivation is to move water from north to south. The water-quality issue is a smoke screen. It may improve export water, but it will significantly degrade water quality in the bay and Delta. The more water you export, the more the bay and Delta suffer.”

Marguerite Young, the California director of Clean Water Action, which is also lobbying for greater bay-Delta flows, said the canal proposed by CalFed “isn’t just a toe in the door for a full-scale peripheral canal -- it’s a whole leg. Once they’ve built a third of it, they could demand to build the rest later, claiming water-quality goals still weren’t being met.

“They don’t even define the water-quality goals,” Young said. “All of us involved in this process assumed the (goals) wouldn’t be in place (for seven years or more), and here they plan to start building the canal after four years.”

But CalFed’s Snow said the proposal would have to demonstrate that there would be little or no damage to fisheries before a canal could be built.

“And the 4,000 cubic-feet-a-second level is the absolute cap,” he said. “The closer we get to 4,000 cfs, the more nervous the fisheries agencies get, and we would respond to that.”

Government officials, who helped negotiate the CalFed proposal, seem cautious about entering into the fray.

“This is a big and complicated document, and we don’t want to jump to any conclusions,” said John Lawrence, the Democratic staff director for the U.S. House of Representatives Resources Committee. Lawrence represents Rep. George Miller of Concord, the senior Democrat on the committee and a major power in the CalFed process.

“There was nothing like (the clauses contained in the June report) in the December proposal, however,” Lawrence said. “Congressman Miller will ask questions, and he’ll want answers.”

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