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Why Should the Public Spend More To Get Less Water from the Delta?

The Westlands Water District today issued the following statement
by General Manager, Tom Birmingham

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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In November 2006, when he created the Delta Blue Ribbon Task Force by executive order, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger recognized that the future of the State of California is dependent on solving complex problems associated with the Sacramento – San Joaquin Rivers Delta and supplying water to fuel the state's economy. The Delta Vision report prepared by the Task Force is the product of substantial work and deliberations, and it does a good job of identifying the issues that must be addressed if the Delta is going to be fixed. However, in its present form, the Vision erects several barriers to solving many of the problems surrounding the Delta and the state's water supply.

Chief among these barriers is the notion that the state may have to reduce its reliance on water tributary to the Delta. This conclusion was reached without any analysis and ignores substantial data that in the near term, substantially more water that is tributary to the Delta can be put to beneficial, consumptive use, while restoring the Delta ecosystem, merely by improving Delta conveyance. This point was made repeatedly by Professor Jeffery F. Mount at the Delta Summit convened by Governor Schwarzenegger and Senator Dianne Feinstein on August 21, 2007. He summarized the conclusions of the authors of the Public Policy Institute of California study on the future of the Delta as follows:

I can sum it up for you, totally. What we found in our study, repeatedly, is that the limiting factor was not the amount of water; it was the conveyance of the water. It was the ability to move water from supply to demand, to demand centers. That was the overarching, number one, limiting factor for us, was conveyance

There is no question that the Delta is broken. The Westlands Water District agrees that repairing this unique environmental resource is essential, not just for agriculture but for California as a whole. As the Delta Vision report makes clear, our existing management and regulatory programs are not working to protect the environment and they are disrupting the delivery of safe drinking water to two-thirds of the state's population. However, the public is not going to support spending billions of dollars to fix this critical link in the state's water system if they're going to wind up getting less water as a result.

This is the contradiction in the report that the Governor and his cabinet need to resolve. Not only is there no basis for this "spend more to get less" assertion, from a political perspective, it would make passage of a bond issue virtually impossible.

The Delta Vision report takes two important steps forward in defining state policy. First, it declares that protecting the health of the Delta ecosystem and meeting the state's needs for water supply are co-equal and inseparable objectives. Second, it affirms that construction of an improved conveyance system is necessary to serve both of those objectives.

These important findings have been undermined, however, by the declaration in the final version that after spending billions of dollars in public funds to repair the Delta and improve conveyance, the public will have to get by on less water than is already being pumped through the Delta. Why would the 25 million water ratepayers who depend on Delta conveyance support such a self-destructive deal? That's not solving a problem; it's making things worse.

There is another aspect of the Delta Vision report which could pose a major stumbling block to further progress. That is the call for a vast new bureaucracy that would centralize power over the Delta, usurp local land use authority and duplicate many of the functions that are already being performed by other state and federal agencies. Governance is an important question. But this proposal is so unwieldy and controversial that it could easily become a distraction from the more pressing issues that the governor and the legislature need to address in resolving the state's water crisis.

The Delta Vision report has correctly defined the twin objectives for Delta water policy. Restoring reliability to the state's water system and restoring the health of the Delta will not resolve all of California's future water needs. But that is where we need to start for the sake of the environment, the economy and the health and safety of the public.

About Westlands:

The Westlands Water District serves a community of more than 600 families who farm some of the most productive agricultural lands in the world. It encompasses more than 600,000 acres in an area 15 miles wide and 70 miles long on the west side of California's Central Valley. The value of the food and fiber produced by Westlands farmers currently totals \$1 billion dollars a year and the regional economic activity generated by its operations exceeds \$3.5 billion annually.

Westlands is a world leader in water conservation. Farmers in Westlands are constantly changing to meet the needs of a dynamic marketplace, enhance the environment, expand the diversity of their crops and apply the most advanced irrigation techniques and technology for water conservation and long-term sustainable production. From its inception, Westlands' distribution system has been fully enclosed, to eliminate losses from evaporation and leakage. Laser-levelling, computer-aided drip irrigation and the extensive use of global positioning systems help Westlands farmers achieve efficiencies of water use of 85 percent or more.