

# Bay-Delta plan faces stormy seas ahead

Sacramento Bee, 12-17-10

"Herding cats" is a term often associated with the Bay-Delta Conservation Plan, an attempt to resolve disputes over water deliveries and ecosystem protection in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

Yet the interests involved – water districts, regulatory agencies, environmental groups and others – aren't just little kitties. Some have sharp claws and saber-toothed fangs and have been clashing with each other for decades.

Numerous state and federal officials, particularly California Natural Resources Secretary Lester Snow, deserve credit for attempting to keep these cats in line. The result is a BDCP "highlights" report released Thursday, along with a separate status update by the federal government. Both demonstrate that BDCP offers promise for addressing the Delta crisis, but still has numerous challenges to confront.

One big question is the economic viability of the plan's centerpiece – a tunnel or canal to ship water through or around the Delta, eliminating "reverse flows" and other impacts associated with the state and federal water pumps.

BDCP estimates such a facility would cost roughly \$12.7 billion to build, and \$83 million a year to operate. While water contractors have agreed to cover the cost, some agricultural districts have recently questioned if they will receive enough water to make the investment worthwhile. Some, including the Westlands Water District, seem to be calling for more water than was delivered during the boom years in the Delta, 2000-2007, before pumping was curtailed to protect fish.

The problem with this demand is it could only be achieved if less water is allowed to flow into San Francisco Bay – which is currently 48 percent of the historical average. In other words, for water contractors to get an acceptable return on investment, the environment would have to suffer.

BDCP supporters believe they can compensate for these reduced flows to the bay by restoring marshes across the Delta, which arguably will help populations of smelt, salmon and other fish. Yet numerous biologists and environmental groups say that marshes alone aren't enough. Healthy flows are essential for fish to survive and rebound, they argue, adding that the state must put more emphasis on conservation and other ways to reduce diversions from the Delta.

Incoming Gov. Jerry Brown will be pivotal in determining the future of this conservation plan, which is expected to be finalized in 2012. It deserves a chance. The alternative is more litigation and conflicting and confusing rulings from the federal courts. But if the final outcome doesn't deliver on the promise of restoring the Delta and creating reliable water supplies, the result will be a new generation of conflict, lawsuits and cat fights.