

Bay Area coalition calls delta plan a water grab

Kelly Zito, San Francisco Chronicle, 11-16-10

A group that has spent four years and \$140 million studying the heart of California's water supply network this week will release a much-anticipated proposal for a giant pipeline running around or under the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.

There's one big snag.

Forty-three cities, counties and water agencies - including those serving more than 4 million residents in San Francisco, the Peninsula and parts of the East Bay - say the plan is a blatant Southern California water grab that could further harm the delta, constrict water supplies and raise water rates in much of Northern California.

Earlier this month, the coalition made its case in a letter to Karen Scarborough, undersecretary of California's Natural Resources Agency and chairwoman of the Bay Delta Conservation Plan steering committee.

" 'Chinatown' isn't just a movie starring Jack Nicholson and Faye Dunaway - it's happening here," said East Bay Municipal Utility District lobbyist Randy Kanouse, referring to the 1974 film based on Los Angeles' controversial dewatering of the Owens Valley.

Water for people, fish

The Bay Delta Conservation Plan was begun in 2006 when some of the state's largest exporters of water from the delta sought to cement their delta diversions for the next 50 years and address the fate of fish protected by the Endangered Species Act. To that end, the exporters also invited environmental groups, other water agencies, and state and federal regulators to the table to craft a long-term management plan for the estuary.

The group enjoyed the support of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, who backed a canal as part of a now-postponed \$11 billion water bond.

But the effort to solve thorny problems in the delta has met its share of challenges, including further deterioration of the habitat, a pronounced dry spell, a faltering economy and widening divisions between various stakeholders. Those factors are delaying release of a complete plan until next year. The committee will release a draft on Thursday, just weeks before Schwarzenegger leaves office and a new administration takes up the water crisis.

So far, the committee's only clear solution to the stressors on the delta appears to be a sizable peripheral canal or tunnel.

Twin goals

The stated goals are twofold: a consistent freshwater supply for exporters and removal of in-delta pumps that kill millions of protected fish and resulted in a federal order limiting diversions. As currently envisioned, the \$10 billion-plus above- or below-ground pipe could funnel as much as 15,000 cubic feet of water per second from the Sacramento River - a rate roughly equal to the flow of the entire river - around or below the delta to points south.

Collectively, "downstream" agencies pull about 6 million acre-feet a year from the delta through the sprawling systems operated by the California Department of Water Resources and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation. One acre-foot equals about 326,000 gallons, or enough to supply a typical household for a year.

By adding a new pipeline, the water agencies hope to stabilize, if not increase, that volume. In addition, the plan calls for spending billions on restoring habitat ravaged by 150 years of development.

The exporters with the most to gain include Metropolitan Water District, which delivers water to 19 million customers from Los Angeles to Ventura, and Westlands Water District, the biggest irrigated farm district in the United States and a powerful ally of U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein.

Critics, who did not participate in the steering committee, argue that politics rather than fairness or science is driving the plan.

In recent months, federal and state scientists have concluded that more fresh water must flow into the delta to keep its flora and fauna healthy. If downstream exporters continue to receive the same - or more - water, "upstream" utilities in San Francisco, Oakland, Stockton and Sacramento would have to slash deliveries and most likely increase prices.

Water diversions

Both the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission and the East Bay Municipal Utility District divert water before it reaches the vast estuary south of Sacramento. The SFPUC, which supplies water to 2.5 million customers in San Francisco and the Peninsula, relies on the Tuolumne River watershed. EBMUD, with 1.3 million customers in Alameda and Contra Costa counties, pulls from the Mokelumne River.

The two agencies are willing to send more water to the delta to safeguard species like the delta smelt. But they refuse to cut diversions to help agencies in Central and Southern California.

"The in-delta flows have to come from someplace," said Steve Ritchie, assistant general manager for water at the SFPUC. "If (exporters) are taking more water and there are more flows needed for fish in the delta - we have real problems with the fairness of that."

Because the exporters would reap the rewards of a pipeline, the upstream agencies also insist the exporters should foot the bill - not their ratepayers or California taxpayers. The exporters have said they would pay for a portion of any pipeline project; but the cost estimate has increased and revenues for most water agencies have declined during the recession.

Change needed

Tom Birmingham, general manager of Westlands, acknowledges that current operations in the delta watershed are unsustainable. He believes a pipeline around the delta is the answer - and one that will not undercut other agencies' supplies.

"The idea is to address the factors affecting species in the delta and to recapture the water supplies we've lost over the last 18 years," he said.

To others, however, the debate between upstream and downstream is somewhat misguided. Just about anyone

who draws water from the entire Sacramento-San Joaquin watershed is implicated in both its demise and its future, said Jonas Minton, water policy analyst for the Planning and Conservation League.

"The world is starting to understand that the entire delta watershed is over-allocated," Minton said. "There's going to have to be some trueing up - not just for exporters but for upstream users, too."