

Delta canal agenda put off again

'Working draft' lacks answers to basic questions

Alex Breitler, Stockton Record, 11-17-10

Last April, state and federal agencies announced their commitment to finishing - by this month - a plan to save the Delta by building a peripheral canal or tunnel and converting farms to wetlands.

The official draft was to be unveiled Thursday. Instead, a "working draft" is coming. But it will lack answers to fundamental questions, such as:

» Who will pay for what? Those who export water from the Delta have said they'll pay for a canal or tunnel that takes water around or beneath the estuary, but that's only part of the Bay Delta Conservation Plan.

» Will it be a canal or a tunnel, and how large?

» What rules will determine when the canal can be used and how much water can be taken?

Four years of effort and more than \$100 million spent have not resolved those basic questions. Thursday will be the 122nd and final scheduled gathering of the plan's steering committee, a group of government agencies, environmentalists, and urban and rural water districts that export water south from the Delta.

The draft due this month has been kicked to the middle of 2011, and with it, construction of any canal or tunnel to 2013.

Divisions among the disparate group were apparent in a legislative oversight hearing Tuesday.

"(Environmentalists) seem to envision a perfect world," said Jason Peltier of Westlands Water District, which receives water pumped from the Delta. "We can't find perfection in this process. If that is their demand, that rock doesn't exist, and we ought not continue spending money to try and find this perfect world."

Conversely, environmental organizations warn that this week's report will merely be the latest in a series of placeholder documents. It will not, they say, assure that ecosystem needs will be placed at the same level as providing a reliable water supply.

"This document will not reflect a consensus view," said Jonathan Rosenfield, a biologist with the conservation group The Bay Institute.

He noted that smaller, less complex conservation plans have taken 10 years or more to piece together.

The Bay Delta plan, if successful, would grant 50-year permits for water agencies to continue taking water from the Delta. Routing that water through a canal or tunnel rather than - or in addition to - existing Delta channels could reduce the number of fish sucked into the giant pumps near Tracy, supporters say.

Others say it is inherently illogical to save a dying estuary by rerouting its freshwater flows.

Officials also plan to prepare a transition report in early December for Gov.-elect Jerry Brown and his

administration.

"It's my expectation there will not be a five-minute delay" in picking up where the Schwarzenegger administration is leaving off, said California Resources Secretary Lester Snow.

"It is my view this may be our last chance before we experience a disaster of some sort" to fix the Delta, Snow said, adding there is dedication to resolving all the unanswered questions.

Assemblyman Jared Huffman, D-San Rafael, chairman of the Water, Parks and Wildlife Committee, asked Snow at Tuesday's hearing about a September brief by federal Department of the Interior biologists, who concluded that decreases in the amount of water flowing out of the Delta under the conservation plan would actually heighten the risk that the Delta smelt will go extinct.

Snow said he hadn't seen that report.