

Proposal to Restore Delta Bogs Down

Delay in Overhauling How Water From the Sacramento-San Joaquin Area Is Used Threatens Delicate Natural Habitat

Robert A. Guth, Wall Street Journal, 10-14-10

Fixing one of the Bay Area's crucial hydrological resources will take more time—again.

Government officials, environmental groups and water agencies say they don't expect to release a complete blueprint for improving California's Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta this year, a missed deadline that could threaten an ambitious plan to revamp the region's fragile water-supply hub and ecosystem.

Participants in the group drafting the proposal, called the Bay Delta Conservation Plan, said in interviews that an environmental study and other plan components won't be completed by a key Nov. 18 meeting. That publication deadline was set after the group missed an August target.

As a result, a complete draft of the plan won't be available for a 90-day public review, required by state and federal law, until late spring or early summer, says Lester Snow, secretary of California's Natural Resources Agency.

"There has been natural slippage in the schedule," Mr. Snow says. He adds the group plans to release as much of the report as it can online next month to give an overview of progress it has made.

An area roughly 740,000 acres fed by the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers, the delta supports a diverse ecosystem and supplies much of the state with water for agriculture and human consumption. Decades of drawing water from the delta has severely damaged the area as a natural habitat. To alleviate the strain, planning officials and environmental groups in 2006 started the BDCP project to better manage the area. Operating under state and federal environmental laws, the plan would create a new permit system that would allow water agencies to pump water from the delta but also require them to pay for restoring the area's habitat.

But the recent delay adds to the risks facing the delta. Any further holdups of the project, now four years running, could destabilize a fragile coalition of government, environmental and other groups behind the effort, BDCP committee members say.

Meanwhile, the project faces growing costs. California water agencies already have spent some \$140 million to study the delta project. An additional \$100 million will be needed to fund the next step of the planning. Without a clear sense soon of progress, those agencies might turn off the money tap.

"It's at a very delicate stage," says Tim Quinn, executive director of the Association of California Water Agencies.

The plan's framers also say they need to have a draft or some progress report complete in time for a new governor and legislators arriving in Sacramento following the November elections.

For the Bay Area, changes in the way water is distributed could affect the drinking-water supply in Santa Clara and Alameda counties, as well as water for agriculture, fishing and recreation throughout the region.

The BDCP is run by a steering committee that includes state agencies, such as California's Department of Water Resources, and federal agencies including the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation. Environmental groups involved include the Nature Conservancy and the Environmental Defense Fund, among others.

From the start, the project's proponents have struggled with how to balance the often-conflicting needs of an area that is both the hub of California's water system and one of North America's most important natural habitats.

The area has long been a contested battlefield for farmers, water agencies, environmental groups and local citizens, which each see different value in the estuary. Years of drawing water from the delta have cut fish populations, while decades-old levees and other frail infrastructure increase chances that an earthquake could imperil a water source for 25 million people and a huge swath of California agriculture.

By August, the protracted BDCP process led Mr. Snow and the U.S. Department of the Interior to hold a series of meetings with a select group of participants in hopes of making faster progress.

Miffed that they weren't included, delta-area legislators, in a letter made public, criticized the "closed-door" meetings as an approach that "serves to further frustrate and anger those within the Delta community."

Mr. Snow countered in a Sept. 23 statement that the meetings were a necessary step to crafting the draft plan.

The criticism fed a belief among some critics that the BDCP will put certain interests above others. The project includes a proposal for a new canal or tunnel for controlling water flowing through the delta. Water agencies want it, but some environmentalists have long opposed the idea, fearing the project would allow water to be diverted to human needs at the expense of the habitat.

BDCP committee members say that isn't the case and are hoping such concerns will be put to rest when the draft plan is released.

While much of the draft—which will likely be more than 1,000 pages and detail major aspects of managing the delta for the next 50 years—is complete, unfinished sections include a chapter on funding and details of whether water agencies will be included in deciding how permits are awarded, say committee members.

The group also needs more time to complete an analysis required by the Endangered Species Act, which will assess the project's impact on fish, wildlife and plant species in the delta.

Richard Roos-Collins, a lawyer and water expert who represents the nonprofit American Rivers in the project, says he remains optimistic the draft will get done sooner rather than later. "The risk of failure is real but manageable," he says. The group has to "create some confidence that a better future is in sight."