# Delta's survival more important than fish

**Mike Taugher, Bay Area News Group, 4-3-11**

WALNUT CREEK - Letting some fish species die off as part of a larger environmental restoration may be the best way to protect the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, a leading California think tank says.

The recommendation in a 500-page report by experts working with the Public Policy Institute of California, is the second time recently that an influential report has suggested some fish, particularly Delta smelt, may become too far gone to save. The other was an early draft from a new state agency charged with crafting a plan for the Delta.

In short, experts assembled by the Public Policy Institute of California say it is time for a number of sweeping changes. Among them:

- Shift the focus from trying to protect single species like Delta smelt and instead take a broader view of the health of the estuary, a shift that could allow smelt to die out if it helps other fish. For example, there is sometimes a conflict between the needs of smelt and salmon over the best time to release water from upstream reservoirs.

- Impose a fee on the use of water to finance improvements.

- Cut water use in urban areas by 30 percent.

- Curtail pollution and invasive species.

"California has essentially run out of cheap new water sources," said Ellen Hanak, an agricultural economist and senior fellow at the PPIC.

In the battle between society and the environment for water, Hanak added, "the fish are losing."

While recommending 30 percent cuts in urban water use, the report contains no similar request for agriculture, which uses four times as much water as California's cities.

The reason, the authors said, is that more efficient use of water on farms would not generate more water for others, including the environment, to use.

Others disagree, but the reasoning behind that conclusion is that water that is used inefficiently on farms percolates into the ground, is used to grow more crops or is picked up for use by others.

"The only way to make more water available is to fallow land," said Jay Lund, a University of California-Davis civil engineer and one of the report's authors.

He also said water conserved in urban areas generally affects lifestyles, while on the farm using less water can have business implications.

An Oakland-based water expert disagreed.

"The failure of the PPIC report to address inefficient use in agriculture leaves a gaping hole in its recommendations for what the state is going to have to do to solve its water problems," said Peter Gleick, president of the Pacific Institute. "It's a blind spot they've had for years."

Gleick's organization also has recommended 30 percent conservation goals for urban areas, but he said between 4 million and 6 million acre-feet of water could be conserved from more efficient water use on farms. While those figures cover farms across the entire state and not just those served by the Delta, it is in the same range as the amount of water pumped out of the Delta each year.

The report says that rather than focusing on single species and Delta pumps, a broader approach is needed that looks at the entire ecosystem and the numerous causes of decline in the estuary.

That is the approach of an ongoing Bay Delta Conservation Plan, a strategy promoted mostly by water users in the San Joaquin Valley and Southern California to satisfy endangered species laws by building a canal or tunnel to move water through the Delta.

The report stops short of endorsing that plan, however, saying it's "basic goals may be impossible to achieve" given state scientists' recent conclusions that more much more water needs to flow through the estuary.

And the report does not suggest fish be allowed to go extinct cavalierly. It calls species triage an ugly idea and notes that endangered species laws prohibit actions that lead to extinctions.

The PPIC report says, however, that drastic actions to prevent Delta smelt, for example, from going extinct could come at a high cost to other endangered fish.

Peter Moyle, an assistant professor at UC-Davis, said he is not yet resigned to the possibility that Delta smelt may disappear from the estuary, but he said as the Delta continues to deteriorate and droughts are always possible, decision makers may find themselves in a tough spot.

"That's a situation I can imagine where you end up giving up on the smelt because the cost is too high on other members of the ecosystem," Moyle said.