

State, feds to move aggressively on Delta plan

Alex Breitler, Stockton Record, 8-12-11

SACRAMENTO -- State and federal officials announced Thursday an "aggressive" schedule to complete the Bay Delta Conservation Plan, which would convert tens of thousands of acres of farmland to wetland, and could include the construction of a peripheral canal or tunnel.

They also announced the "potential" for an additional \$100 million from water contractors who rely on Delta water. That money is needed to finish writing the plan; billions more will be needed to actually execute it.

About \$150 million has been spent to date. Over the next month or so, the boards of about 50 water districts will decide if they want to kick in the additional \$100 million, for a total cost of about \$250 million, before a single shovelful of earth is turned.

"It's a large ticket," said Roger Patterson, assistant general manager of the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, a major urban user of Delta water.

The state had asked the contractors for more money about a year ago, Patterson said Thursday at a meeting updating the public on the progress of the plan.

"We basically said we need to see a road map and a schedule to get us through the rest of the process to the goal line. That has taken some amount of time to do that. But we wanted to see that before we would ask individual boards of directors to make that commitment."

Water contractors are paying for most of the planning process. They'll also pay for the canal or tunnel itself - about \$12.7 billion. What's not clear is who will fund the wetland restoration, which could be an additional \$3.6 billion, Patterson said.

The new schedule calls for a draft conservation plan to be completed by summer 2012. The final plan would be finished by 2013.

This isn't the first time officials have proposed an ambitious schedule to complete the deeply complex plan. The administration of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger first aimed to finish the plan in 2010 and begin construction on a new aqueduct in 2011.

The Brown administration has promised a more deliberate and transparent process.

"We've opened up the process to stakeholders, which wasn't the case before," said state Secretary for Natural Resources John Laird. "We're trying to get clear goals. ... We recognize it's an aggressive schedule. If we don't target an aggressive schedule, we will not move."

If successful, the plan would grant 50-year permits to continue exporting Delta water to farms and cities from the Bay Area to San Diego, while also addressing the Delta's suffering ecosystem. A canal or tunnel faces opposition in San Joaquin County, in part because routing freshwater around the Delta instead of through it could make the water saltier and decrease crop production.