

Brown's water chief wants Delta water diverted to Southern California

Mike Taugher, Bay Area News Group, 2-5-11

The Brown administration's top official on Delta matters said this week he is confident a new aqueduct can be built to divert water from the Delta for water users in Southern California.

In his first interview since joining the new administration, Jerry Meral said events and information developed since he backed the Peripheral Canal as part of Gov. Jerry Brown's first administration have only strengthened the case for it.

And estimates developed at the end of the Schwarzenegger administration about the amount of water that could be taken from the Delta will probably prove to be in the right ballpark, he said. He cautioned that he was expressing personal convictions and that final decisions would be made only after formal reviews.

"I don't want to prejudge this," Meral said, "but something like a facility roughly of the size in the earlier documents will be proposed, will be permitted and be built."

Meral, who has a doctorate in zoology, has spent much of his career working for environmental groups. He was also deputy director of the state Department of Water Resources from 1975 to 1983, when he supported the controversial Peripheral Canal that would have skirted the Delta to move Sacramento River water to the south.

Voters statewide killed that plan in 1982, in part due to strong opposition in Contra Costa County.

Now deputy secretary for the Bay Delta Conservation Plan, Meral has the distinction of being both a prominent environmentalist and a strong supporter of an aqueduct to reduce reliance on south Delta pumps. Many environmentalists outright oppose the aqueduct while others who are open to the idea are much more qualified in their support.

An aqueduct is now the centerpiece for the conservation plan. In recent months, tunnels under the Delta appear to have overtaken a canal as the preferred choice.

By using the aqueduct instead of south Delta pumps, and by restoring Delta wetlands, supporters hope the plan can satisfy endangered species laws and end water supply disruptions caused by environmental problems in the Delta.

East Bay water officials who have been skeptical of the plans were nonetheless encouraged by Meral's willingness to listen to them.

"I have more hope that we'll be getting a fair hearing than we did before," said Greg Gartrell, assistant general manager of the Contra Costa Water District.

But, Gartrell said, there is a threat in trying to balance environmental needs with water supplies for Delta water users in parts of the Bay Area, San Joaquin Valley and Southern California. The plan could end up either taking water from, or degrading water quality for, others.

The Contra Costa Water District, Delta farm agencies and upstream water users, including the East Bay Municipal Utility District, which relies on water pipelines from the Sierra Nevada, could be harmed, Gartrell said.

"They could be solving their problems with our water. That's a long tradition in this state," Gartrell said.

After four years and \$140 million in spending, the Bay Delta Conservation Plan has arrived at a delicate point. The central question: Can a set of environmental criteria be developed for factors such as salinity levels and the amount of water in upstream rivers that, (1) provides enough environmental restoration to justify a 50-year water extraction permit and (2) releases enough water to make the project financially worthwhile to the participating farm and urban water agencies?

Much of the project costs, more than \$12 billion, would be paid for by Southern California, San Joaquin Valley farm districts and others, such as Santa Clara County.

A study meant to determine how the proposed plan would work was tripped up last year by biologists at federal regulatory agencies.

In essence, the biologists concluded that the way in which Delta water users wanted to run the project would not protect the environment enough to earn the 50-year permit they seek.

San Joaquin Valley farm districts threatened to quit.

Now, state and federal officials are trying to devise standards that might pass that test.

Agency officials could soon propose new guidelines, Meral said.

While an agreement amounts only to what it is to be studied and not a guarantee that such a project would be approved, Meral said it was cause for optimism that the plan could work.

He acknowledged that any plan might have shortcomings.

"There's a danger of overconfidence in what you can do," Meral said. "The whole goal is to have a flexible project, as flexible as it can be."

"I find it hard to believe a compromise can't be reached," he said.

He said that upstream water users and Delta interests that have felt shut out of planning should be heard.

"We're thrilled to death that finally the state of California has asked for our opinion," said Randy Kanouse, lobbyist for the East Bay Municipal Utility District.

Others remain skeptical, saying they fear the fix is in and that the time for meaningful input has passed.

"If the (Bay-Delta Conservation Plan) were to be done right, every option on the table would have to be evaluated and analyzed," said Barbara Barrigan-Parrilla, campaign director for Restore the Delta, a coalition of environmental groups and Delta landowners.

In a recent letter to state Delta authorities, the Contra Costa water district argued that the state should first figure out how much water is needed by the environment and how much water is needed by those with higher legal rights to Delta water than the agencies looking to build the aqueduct.

Meral said those kinds of determinations are the realm of the State Water Resources Control Board and that it does not make sense to wait.

Gartrell also contends that an aqueduct one-fifth the size of the one under consideration would cost less, be less controversial and would deliver nearly as much water.

Environmental restrictions would prevent full use of the larger aqueduct, Gartrell said.

"What I see developing is a race to build something that they won't have the ability to use," Gartrell said.

An oversized aqueduct would lead to strong political pressure to run more water through it, cutting the supply for north state users and the environment, he said.