

Manage water for today, new study says

Matt Weiser, Sacramento Bee, 2-24-11

A new report released Wednesday on California's well-recognized water management problems might be most noteworthy for what it does not include.

The report by the Public Policy Institute of California, "Managing California's Water," does not suggest deep water conservation on farms.

It also does not presume that all of the state's native fishes can be saved. Or that all its aquatic habitats should be restored to some pre-settlement ideal.

Rather, the report's theme is "reconciliation," which the authors define as managing California's water resources to benefit the environment and the economy of today.

"We have to keep in mind, we don't have a natural system left in California," said Peter Moyle, one of the co-authors and a fisheries professor at UC Davis. "We need to build a system that works as well for people as it does for fish."

The authors propose a shift from managing water and habitats based on the needs of a single endangered species to one that preserves whole ecosystems. They go so far as to suggest this may mean sacrificing some species for a greater good.

The 500-page report focuses on statewide water problems, but the eight authors acknowledge the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta remains at the heart of many issues.

In an earlier report by the institute, many of the same authors supported a canal or tunnel to divert a portion of the Sacramento River's flow around the Delta. They do so again here, citing it as the best alternative to halting all water diversions from the Delta, which they view as unrealistic since 25 million Californians rely on that water.

They propose cutting urban water demand statewide by 30 percent, which could allow total Delta water diversions to be cut by about 10 percent, further helping the estuary.

Yet they propose no conservation goal for agriculture, which uses about 80 percent of all the state's water. Farm conservation, they assert, is ineffective in reducing net water demand because the saved water still ends up getting used to grow more crops elsewhere.

Real agricultural water savings come only from fallowing farm land, the authors state, which should be determined by market forces.

These claims were disputed by Peter Gleick, president of the Pacific Institute, a nonprofit think tank that researches water and other environmental issues.

A 30 percent urban conservation goal will do very little to cut Delta water diversions, he said, because urban water use is relatively small.

And in previous studies of his own, Gleick has identified millions of acre-feet in potential water savings on farms, whether by switching from flood to drip irrigation, or by changing the delivery practices of irrigation agencies.

"A vast amount of water could be saved by smart agricultural efficiency practices," Gleick said. "The argument that agriculture can't save water pretends there's no unproductive evaporation, and that there's no water lost to groundwater that we can't recover."

Many of the report's conclusions echo prior studies that call for government reform.

For instance, it recommends transferring the State Water Project, which manages Delta diversion pumps and the California Aqueduct, from the state Department of Water Resources to a new independent system operator. This would function much like the agency that oversees the state electric grid.

The state's regional water quality control boards would become regional stewardship authorities, with expanded power over issues now centralized in Sacramento: flood management, water quality and supply, and restoration.

The State Water Resources Control Board would gain full regulatory power over groundwater, which is not even monitored comprehensively today.

Ellen Hanak, one of the study's lead authors and a senior fellow at the institute, said many recommendations can be achieved at low cost and without new legislation.

"Our assessment of the current situation is bleak," she said. "A lot of the management we've been doing in California has been crisis driven. We have to get better."