

The fate of the peripheral canal is one of the most debated topics ever in water politics

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The old chestnut of liberals vs. conservatives, or Democrats vs. Republicans, falls short in many real-life situations. But nowhere is this shorthand further from reality than in water politics. Unlike many debates within government, water divides the state into North vs. South. As Mark Twain supposedly once said, “Whiskey is for drinking; water is for fighting over.”

In California, it is increasingly clear that there are more claims to water than there is actual water available. The issue at the forefront of state water politics is once again the peripheral canal, first proposed in the 1980s but voted down by the public. Now we find ourselves once again facing this proposal, as it winds its way through the state Capitol.

Presently, California transports water from North to South via the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. Water is pumped out of the Delta and flows to Southern California through two main aqueducts. The major point of emphasis has been the pumping stations, which have had a negative effect on the Delta ecosystem, endangering numerous aquatic species and resulting in a 2007 federal order to reduce pumping by 30 percent. Though helping the Delta ecosystem, this has created uncertainty for farmers and cities to the south.

The basic premise behind the peripheral canal is to bypass the Delta entirely. This would be accomplished by tapping the Sacramento River at a point north of the Delta. Water taken at this point would reduce stress on the Delta smelt and other species, but could disrupt the Delta ecosystem in entirely different ways.

Bypassing the Delta also provides a more stable supply of water to the South. The U.S. Geological Survey reports that over the next 30 years there is a 63 percent chance that a magnitude 6.7 earthquake could strike the Bay Area, and a 96 percent chance of an East Bay earthquake in the next 100 years. Levees in the Delta protect islands with a 100-year farming history, which has caused erosion of soil to below sea level. Up to 50 levees are expected to fail during such a quake, and about 20 islands of the Delta would be at risk of flooding, which would cause salt water to enter the Delta’s freshwater system resulting in both human and economic loss, and the shutdown of pumps sending water south. The interruption in water delivery could cost \$10 billion per year and jeopardize the drinking supply for 25 million people. Proponents of the peripheral canal have often used the levee conditions to their political advantage, but strengthening the weakest levees to withstand a quake would beat the cost of building a canal by about 10 times.

Some of the strongest voices of opposition against the proposed canal are from the farmers and locals in the Delta communities. Of major concern is the effect a new canal could have on the fishing industry. Redirection of water to the south from a point north of the Delta could lead to a rise in salinity levels and the loss of one of the area’s important economic bases. California American Indian tribes also oppose the canal for fear of its effects on the natural migration of fish, effect on the Delta’s ecosystem and fear of the greedy nature of Southern California water needs. The tribes claim to have a federal right to be involved in any changes made to the natural water flows of California.

Critics sometimes liken the situation to the story told in Roman Polanski’s film *Chinatown*, where real-estate speculators created a climate of fear, built an aqueduct at public expense and benefited from the secrecy of the

deal. Though the current canal proposal has elements of fear-based politics and clearly benefits farmers and those in the southlands, secrecy is not at issue today. In fact, this is perhaps the most thoroughly debated question of water politics in living memory.

It seems that Northern and Southern California are in opposition in many aspects of this issue: who will benefit from building the canal; who will suffer if it is built or if it isn't; what are the long-term effects for the Delta, for cities, and for farmers; and ultimately, who will pay? Everyone in California must be aware of the economic crisis and budget deficit.

Regardless, the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta issue needs urgent attention. But paying for a new project system is complex: Money could come from the general fund (which currently has a \$26 billion deficit), or it could come from the beneficiaries of the water (who claim an inability to pay and a past promise from the state). There seems to be no definitive answer on who is going to pay for the construction of it or the upkeep once built. Who will sacrifice for others to benefit?

The key question here is how water should be governed in the state. With so much at stake (i.e., sufficient water access, species protection and disaster potential), solving the Delta crisis is crucial. As debates continue that revolve around the peripheral canal, and controversy escalates, a proposal by supporters of the canal recommends that (1) the management of the State Water Project should represent that of an "independent utility as a public benefit corporation"; and (2) the current form of management via board structure should be replaced by one appointed state trustee. The State Water Resources Control Board currently controls water rights. (The Department of Water Resources manages state-owned water infrastructure, such as dams, reservoirs and aqueducts.) The five board members are appointed to four-year terms by the governor, and confirmed by the state Senate. Moving to a single trustee and a utility regulatory raises questions about checks and balances and objectivity. Furthermore, if utility oversight in the state can result in disasters like the San Bruno gas explosion, it might seem prudent to keep a State Water Board with judicial review power in place to avoid the cozy relations between providers and regulators when it comes to water rights and allocation.

Many Californians feel that state politics have been dysfunctional for some time, and water politics have never been easy. But making the complex system of water transfers less accountable to review, easing the implementation of major changes and instituting less oversight of large environmental issues certainly is not the answer.