

A way to revamp water policy

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Water is California's most precious resource. Yet in lean years and wet ones, California manages to mismanage this resource in spectacular fashion.

That's the take-home message from a monumental report by the Public Policy Institute of California, titled "Managing California Water."

The 482-page report issues both a clarion call and a road map for lawmakers and water interests to move beyond conflict toward a new era of "reconciliation."

One clear message of the report is the need to modernize and consolidate the various institutions that govern how water is used. On the state level, decisions about water are now bifurcated between the Department of Water Resources and the state Water Resources Control Board.

The PPIC, like the Little Hoover Commission before it, recommends that the water resources board be merged with sections of DWR that have nothing to do with running the state water project. This new state water department would enforce water rights, administer water quality laws, conduct statewide planning for water, oversee flood management and protect the public trust.

Making this department separate from the state water project would address the perception (and the reality) that state water contractors have inordinate influence over state water planning. Under the PPIC proposal, the state water project would become an independent public benefit corporation, similar to the Independent System Operator, which manages the state's power transmission.

The PPIC proposal is a good one. In buying and selling electricity and maintaining its infrastructure, the state water project would be more nimble and responsive if it didn't have to deal with the state's convoluted contracting procedures.

Yet the PPIC is smart not to recommend that state water contractors take complete control of these water works, as some of them would like to do. Contractors could sit on the board of an independent benefit corporation, but other interests would have a seat at the table, too.

The PPIC also is on target recommending a stronger role for the Department of Fish and Game. Under its plan, this department would no longer be subservient to the Fish and Game Commission and would have more direct authority over river flows to help fish. The Fish and Game Commission, meanwhile, would go back to its original role — regulating hunting and fishing.

Once he deals with the budget, Gov. Jerry Brown would be smart to assess the recommendations of the PPIC and the previous Little Hoover report, and bring more sense to water governance.