

Brown administration pushing ahead with Sacramento-San Joaquin delta plans

Bettina Boxall, Los Angeles Times, 3-4-11

The future of a multibillion-dollar project to reroute water shipments from Northern California and salvage the battered ecosystem of the Sacramento-San Joaquin delta started looking shaky late last year.

Irked that the project may not give them all the water they want, major San Joaquin Valley irrigation districts said they were walking away from the planning process.

But in prepared remarks, a state water official made it clear Thursday that as far as the administration of Gov. Jerry Brown is concerned, the program is alive and vital to the millions of Californians who draw water from the delta.

Jerry Meral, the Brown administration's point man in the delta wars, canceled his appearance at a Los Angeles water policy conference because of illness. His speech was delivered -- with a few wry asides -- by Randy Kanouse, a Bay Area water official who is a friend of Meral's but also a vocal critic of the delta project.

Meral did not endorse specifics of the plans, the latest version of which calls for extensive habitat restoration and construction of a huge tunnel system to carry Sacramento River water beneath the delta to southbound aqueducts.

But he emphasized that the current system of pumping from the south delta causes "great harm to the biology of the delta, while delivering relatively poor quality water under the constant threat of water supply interruptions, from court imposed sanctions to failing levees."

Meral, an environmentalist who handled water issues during Brown's first administration, said the expense of new facilities should be borne by the agencies supplied by the delta. "By absorbing the full cost of new water facilities, water users will receive price signals about the true cost of water, and will manage it accordingly," he said.

Meral insisted that delta management should be guided by science "unfiltered by political considerations."

And he acknowledged complaints that various organizations have been excluded from key decisions, suggesting the formation of working groups open to a broad array of interests that would hammer out contentious aspects of the delta proposal.

"More public involvement is necessary," Meral said. "In fact, it is critical for the results to be accepted by all."