

Bay-Delta plan lacks scientific justification, National Research Council says

Debra Kahn, Environment & Energy Publishing, 5-6-11

California policymakers are not heeding science in their plan to build a new pumping system to divert water around the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, according to a review released by the National Research Council today.

At issue is the Bay Delta Conservation Plan (BDCP), a five-year-old effort to build a \$13 billion alternative to the current water management system in the delta, which relies on hundreds of miles of levees in existing river channels to deliver water to 25 million Californians. The new system under discussion would divert water into either a 40-mile peripheral canal or tunnels to avoid stressing endangered species, including the delta smelt and chinook salmon.

The federal research body reviewed the BDCP's draft plan at the request of the Interior and Commerce departments, which would be in charge of approving its compliance with the Endangered Species Act.

Scientists found the plan's analysis of environmental effects incomplete and unclear, especially in describing how water managers would adjust their policies as results become more apparent over time. The plan's environmental review component, called an "effects analysis," was not ready in time to include in the NRC report.

"The Bay Delta Conservation Plan is incomplete as it stands now," said the chairman of the review panel, Henry Vaux, a resource economics professor at the University of California, Riverside. "It has no effects analysis, the purposes and goals of the plan are unclear, and the science we find in the plan is solid but not synthesized."

The draft plan, released in November 2010 at the sunset of then-Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's (R) term, also suffers from a lack of focus, analysts concluded. It seems to straddle the line between justifying the plan under the Endangered Species Act and serving as a more comprehensive planning document, the council found.

"It's unclear whether it's a habitat conservation plan or a more comprehensive plan," Vaux said. "In most planning endeavors, it's important to be quite clear about what you're trying to accomplish. The science one uses, and the sequencing and timing of its application, would depend on whether this is a habitat conservation plan or a dual-objective water management plan."

There is a robust body of research that the plan could draw upon, the council said, particularly research into the effects of climate change on the delta.

A state-sponsored review out yesterday also found the plan scientifically lacking. "The conclusions for delta smelt and other species that the BDCP provides a net benefit rests on poorly described actions and vague analysis that habitat restoration will provide a substantial increase in population," says the review, conducted by ICF International, an environmental consulting firm.

But state officials defended the plan. In a call with reporters, Natural Resources Secretary John Laird said the NRC analysis was already outdated. "We are embracing this report because it's really a snapshot of where this program existed seven months ago," he said. "It was heartening to hear from the organization itself that they knew this was not a complete program when they did it, and they didn't recommend starting over."

Environmentalists said the NRC report confirmed their fears of a process that seeks to ratify existing plans rather than evaluate potential outcomes. "The new administration's coming up to speed on this, and we want to give them the time to do that, but I haven't seen any change in approach that would produce a change in the next set of documents," said Jonathan Rosenfield, a conservation biologist for the Bay Institute. "It still reads like a *post hoc* rationalization of a bunch of ideas that we started out with."

Fishermen, who are generally wary that a canal or tunnel would end up diverting more river water from fish, were similarly skeptical.

"We certainly agree with the state that the effects analysis has not really been adequate," said Dick Pool, president of Pro-Troll Inc., a fishing equipment seller. "What we need to do is get proposals in front of the BDCP that will make real changes in restoring the delta and fisheries, and then analyze the effects analysis of those." Near-term solutions like trucking newly hatched fish directly to the mouth of the Sacramento River should be evaluated, he said.