

Brown administration looks at smaller water project to bypass Delta

Matt Weiser, Sacramento Bee, 5-11-11

Gov. Jerry Brown's top water official revealed Tuesday that the administration is backing away from former Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's plan to build giant tunnels diverting Sacramento River water around the Delta.

Jerry Meral, deputy secretary of the state's Natural Resources Agency, told an Assembly committee the tunnels are no longer the leading option to solve the Delta's chronic water and environmental problems.

He said a range of alternatives will now be considered by the Bay Delta Conservation Plan, an effort to balance water supply and environmental stresses in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

Among them will be a much smaller diversion originally proposed by environmentalists, which never got traction in the Schwarzenegger administration.

"If you pre-commit to a project, you're going to fail in the (environmental) process, and we're not going to do that," Meral said, referring to the California Environmental Quality Act's requirements, a rigorous legal and environment review the plan must satisfy.

The Bay Delta Conservation Plan was launched by the Schwarzenegger administration as a way to obtain Endangered Species Act approval for new Delta waterworks. The intent is both to improve the reliability of Delta water deliveries while also restoring aquatic habitat and fish populations.

About 25 million Californians from Napa to San Diego depend on Delta water, so a fix is essential to public safety and the state's economy.

On Tuesday, Meral did not say the large tunnels would be completely ruled out.

But the intention to remove that project as the primary focus of study is "frankly a rather fundamental shift," said Assemblyman Jared Huffman, D-San Rafael, who chairs the Assembly Water, Parks and Wildlife Committee that met Tuesday.

There is growing scientific and political agreement that the Delta is already overtapped. The strain has reduced the period of time each year in which the full amount of water can be pulled out without harming the environment.

So planners have focused on relocating the diversion point from its current location, near Tracy, to a place that might be less harmful to the environment.

Studies have shown this might be possible upstream on the Sacramento River, where flows are greater and the water is fresher. Pulling water out there might also allow natural salinity fluctuations to be restored in parts of the Delta, which is important to fish.

In March 2010, the plan's appointed steering committee decided to focus on a pair of tunnels 33 feet in diameter, capable of carrying water at 15,000 cubic feet per second.

Some perspective: That is about double the current flow in the American River.

At an estimated cost of \$13 billion, the economics began to look iffy for the water agencies that would have to pay for the project. This was especially so after regulatory agencies questioned the safety of diverting even greater quantities of water at this new location, as some water suppliers had hoped.

At one point last year, planners proposed a project description that called for Delta water users to receive their "full contract amounts." In reality, this has rarely been achieved even in the wettest years, and could result in annual Delta pumping increases on the order of 1 million acre-feet annually.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency responded with a June letter warning federal agencies that "significantly increasing exports out of a stressed Delta is the wrong policy."

Meral said Tuesday the conservation plan will consider a single 3,000-cfs tunnel originally suggested by Jonas Minton, a senior project manager at the Planning and Conservation League.

"We're pleased that as science, political and financial realities set in, the new administration is looking more objectively at possible alternatives," Minton said.

The state's major water agencies have spent \$150 million on the planning effort so far. They are now being asked for another \$100 million to finish the process, said Laura King-Moon, assistant general manager of the State Water Contractors, whose members buy water from the Delta.

"Our organization believes that 15,000 cfs is the optimal size and we continue to believe that," she said. "We understand this administration needs to make up its own mind on how it wants to analyze the problem."

A question now is whether there is value in a smaller project for water agencies.

King-Moon said her organization would be prepared to accept less than "full contract" deliveries if members can be guaranteed some minimum amounts under various conditions, even severe drought.

"We recognize there's not going to be a single amount that we're guaranteed," she said. "But we have to have assurances that the proposed operations would meet our basic water supply needs."