

California's Water Delta plan must ensure supply

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The Delta Stewardship Council, charged with developing a plan for the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta that advances the "co-equal" goals of statewide water supply reliability and restoration of a sustainable Delta ecosystem, is to release its final plan by January.

The Delta, of course, is crucial to the delivery of water to Southern California and to Central Valley farms, but the flow has been reduced by federal rulings due to fall-offs in populations of smelt and salmon. The degraded environment of the Delta, and the earthen levees there that hold back saltwater but are structurally suspect, are the biggest factors in the unreliability of the statewide water supply.

So the stewardship council's product is vital to the state's future. Unfortunately, the council appears to have drifted toward the restoration side of the two goals at the expense of the supply reliability side.

That's the opinion of the Ag-Urban Coalition, a super-association of dozens of water districts and organizations from Northern and Southern California - including San Bernardino Valley Municipal and Western Municipal water districts - along with the California Chamber of Commerce, Building Industry Association, Farm Bureau Federation and other groups.

That coalition, pulled together in the spring, is trying to steer the stewardship council back on track toward a comprehensive and effective plan that would accomplish the two worthy goals.

Timothy Quinn, executive director of the Association of California Water Agencies, points out that water districts have changed the way they do business in recent years, taking many different kinds of steps to develop local supplies and reduce their dependence on state water. That's especially true of agencies here in the Inland Empire.

Yet, the stewardship council is leaning primarily on higher water flows into the Delta, at the expense of the state water supply, rather than using a comprehensive approach to reduce pollution, invasive species (like the striped bass that eat young salmon) and other stressors on the Delta ecology. Land used for farming could be purchased and restored to natural habitat.

The plan must direct such concrete actions to restore the Delta so that the water supply can be made more reliable, not less. It must result in better ways to convey water to farms and cities where it is needed, or California's future will remain in doubt.

The council's action plan - currently in its fifth iteration - offers too little action in the short and long runs, especially those that would ensure future water supply.

Ultimately there has to be equilibrium between those "co-equal" goals of ecosystem restoration and supply reliability. If not, the whole effort - which is vital to California's future - will fall apart.