

Rescind Delta plan oversight agreement, U.S. lawmakers demand

Mike Taugher, Bay Area News Group, 10-25-11

Five Northern California lawmakers are demanding that the Interior Department withdraw from a key Delta planning agreement because they say it gives farmers in the San Joaquin Valley and Southern California "unprecedented influence" at the expense of Delta landowners, salmon fishermen and others.

The state and federal governments and a number of water agencies that depend on Delta water signed the agreement two months ago to clear the way for the agencies to commit an additional \$100 million for planning and consultant work on a \$12 billion aqueduct. It is the centerpiece of the Bay Delta Conservation Plan, which the agencies want in order to secure more reliable supplies.

The agreement gives the water agencies more access to information and more control over planning than others who have been helping develop the plan, including Delta representatives and environmentalists, the lawmakers said.

"They sort of drove the train off the tracks," said Rep. George Miller, D-Martinez, who signed a letter sent Monday to Interior Secretary Ken Salazar.

"This looks like they're turning the process into a pay-to-play. That's not going to work."

The state official leading the plan said that while the agreement was needed to keep the plan moving forward, he did not think the agencies were getting any objectionable commitments.

"I'm a little mystified about what the problem is there," said Jerry Meral, deputy secretary for the state Natural Resources Agency.

After nearly \$140 million in studies and other consultant work, the agencies wanted a new agreement to justify their additional \$100 million installment to complete the studies. Lacking such commitments could make it difficult to get continued support from agencies' boards of directors and customers.

The lawmakers said the agreement goes too far.

"This raises very serious questions about whose process this is, ultimately; if the water export contractors' funding has given them control over the process, it would be to the detriment of the Bay-Delta and to the public interest," the lawmakers wrote.

Specifically, they say the plan appears to conflict with environmental protection laws, salmon restoration and measures to protect water quality in Contra Costa and other parts of the region.

Water agencies would have access to draft reports and the ability to help craft government responses to comments on the plan.

The letter asks Salazar to withdraw the agreement and open up a 45-day period for public comments.

Salazar spokesman Adam Fetcher said in an email that his office would respond to the congressional representatives.

"Transparency and accessibility for all parties in this process is a key part of our efforts to move forward with the (Bay Delta Conservation Plan) as quickly as possible in order to address the all-important goals of a healthy Bay Delta ecosystem and a reliable water supply for California," Fetcher said.

In addition to Miller, Rep. John Garamendi, D-Walnut Grove; Rep. Jerry McNerney, D-Pleasanton; Rep. Mike Thompson, D-St. Helena; and Rep. Doris Matsui, D-Sacramento, signed the letter.