

The struggle for delta water

San Francisco Chronicle, 3-4-12

California water planners passed a milestone Wednesday in efforts to balance the competing needs of fish, farmers and cities when they released 10,000 pages of scientific documents framing the plan to restore the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta and increase water exports. Now the negotiations begin.

The playing field for the negotiations is the Bay Delta Conservation Plan, a federal habitat conservation blueprint that attempts to bring the state and federal water projects into compliance with the Endangered Species Act - and may allow the killing of some fish under "take permits."

Water exports were curtailed in 2007 when key delta fish populations declined precipitously, setting off a legal and political battle among the diverse players of California's water world.

The Bay Delta Conservation Plan will require give-and-take by environmental interests, delta landowners, farmers, fishermen and water contractors to more than triple the amount of delta wetlands; dedicate water to struggling fish populations including salmon; and balance water deliveries - a difficult [proposition](#) among these distrustful parties.

Negotiations will reach a climax in July when planners will lay out a more detailed plan of how they will achieve the required co-equal goals of providing more water supply and protecting the delta ecosystem.

There are already attempts by some interests to wriggle out of the plan and jump ahead in the water-delivery line, disrupting efforts to share the state's water equitably.

Legislation authored by San Joaquin Valley Rep. Devin Nunes, R- Tulare, passed the House on Wednesday and seeks to guarantee water for agricultural irrigator Westlands Water District, which under current water law holds secondary water rights.

Also afoot are efforts to waive the Endangered Species Act, thus relieving water exporters from the need to comply.

The research unveiled Wednesday and paid for by the state water contractors lays out but does not endorse a plan to spend \$12 billion for either tunnels or an aqueduct to move water from the Sacramento River around the delta to existing pumping facilities. It is estimated it will cost another \$12 billion to \$13 billion to operate the facility over the 50 years of the permit. State water contractors say they remain committed to paying the full costs of the conveyance and its operation.

Funds for delta restoration and payments to western delta farmers who might lose their farmlands would come from a November water bond. The hammer in negotiations? Water exporters must meet agreed-upon habitat restoration goals.

Water discussions tend to devolve into us-versus-them tirades, but most Californians, including 3 million in the Bay Area, use delta water. "To sustain the economy of Silicon Valley, a workable delta solution must be found," said Beau Goldie, chief executive officer of the Santa Clara Water District. Let the negotiations begin.