

Scientists -- 'No silver bullet' to declining Delta

Alex Breitler, Stockton Record, 3-30-12

There is no single cause for the deterioration of the Delta, a team of independent scientists said Thursday in a long-awaited report that fails to resolve one of the largest areas of controversy.

The report by a committee of the National Academy of Sciences marks the end of a two-year investigation launched during the state's most recent drought.

Congress and the federal government asked the influential academy - a kind of "Supreme Court" of science, although its findings are not legally enforceable - to study the Delta and California water as a whole.

The panel of experts from across the nation issued three reports and made a number of findings. But in the end, the scientists said they could not rank the Delta's problems in order of significance, making it likely that debate will continue over who the biggest culprits are and what the best solutions might be.

The scientists also said they did not have enough information to comment on the merits of a proposed peripheral canal or tunnel, which would route water past the Delta on its way to cities and farms in the Bay Area, south San Joaquin Valley and Southern California.

The panel did warn that Californians had better get used to water shortages, and that the state would be wise to come up with a better plan to deal with them.

"We're entering an era in which water is less plentiful than we would want it to be - almost all of the time, not just in drought," said Henry Vaux Jr., a professor emeritus of resource economics at the University of California, Berkeley. "We're trying to give our fellow citizens a wake-up call that water scarcity is not simply limited to drought situations."

The Delta, west of Stockton, isn't just a place to drop a fishing line or take a lazy boat ride. It's a source of water for two-thirds of the state, which means the strength of the levees and the survival of threatened fish species have large implications for California as a whole.

In previous reports, the 17-member panel found that pumping restrictions to protect fish were "scientifically justified" and found major flaws in an early draft plan to build a canal or tunnel and convert tens of thousands of acres of Delta farmland into wildlife habitat.

This last report is much broader. It examines, at some length, the myriad problems in the Delta: pollution, invasive fish, upstream dams and water exports, among others.

Some Delta advocates place blame mostly on the water export pumps near Tracy. Some water users who depend on the Delta place blame on other factors.

In the end, addressing only one problem is not likely to reverse the Delta's decline, Vaux said Thursday.

"There is no silver bullet," he said.

The scientists also found that the Delta cannot be completely restored to the condition it was in before the arrival of settlers in the 19th century. There may be a way, however, to guide it toward a "more desirable future"

than its degraded condition of today.

As was the case with the scientists' past reports, water users on all sides of the issue can probably find things they like in the latest review.

The State Water Contractors - an association of Delta water users - said Thursday that the panel's conclusion that no single factor is to blame supports the need to proceed with the Bay Delta Conservation Plan. That plan aims to both restore the Delta and improve how water is conveyed around or through it - possibly with a \$12 billion or \$13 billion tunnel.

Opponents of that plan, however, might find their own talking points in the 181-page report. The scientists found that the Delta decision-makers of both today and years past lack clear roles and responsibilities, threatening the development of any balanced plan. The scientists also point to the need to examine the costs and benefits, and to carefully evaluate possible alternatives to a canal or tunnel, as elected officials within the Delta have requested.