

# Science group skeptical of Delta proposal

Alex Breitler, Stockton Record, 2-24-13

A group of Delta scientists is questioning whether the state's twin tunnels plan will really be guided by sound science, as promised last year by Gov. Jerry Brown and U.S. Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar.

Debate over the controversial Delta project often focuses on the tunnels themselves - how big they'll be, where they'll go, and how much water they'll divert away from the Delta. But the Delta Independent Science Board in a draft critique is shining light on the bureaucracy that would be put in place after the tunnels are built, and the role scientists will play in making decisions about how the tunnels are operated.

Promoters of the Bay Delta Conservation Plan, as it is formally known, have proposed a structure in which water agencies have primary control over the project, with wildlife agencies watching to make sure rules they impose are followed.

A "science manager" would monitor the impact the tunnels have on the environment. That person, however, would be hired by a "program manager" who in turn would be hired by the water agencies.

"How will this chain of command produce independent scientific advice?" the science board asks in its critique. The group argues that the plan needs independent oversight and integration - not mere coordination - with the many existing scientific endeavors in the Delta, one of the most thoroughly studied estuaries in the world.

Failure to integrate will result in "combat science" and fragmentation, the group argues. Further, while some scientists would serve on a committee that could consider tweaking tunnel operations if needed, disputes among members would be resolved at a higher level - perhaps by the program manager hired by the water agencies.

"The draft does not appear to require that science guide such decisions, in contrast with Governor Brown's and Secretary Salazar's commitment," the group says.

Richard Norgaard, chair of the science board, declined to comment on the critique, saying in an email that it was a draft that had not yet been finalized. But Tina Swanson, a biologist with the environmental group Natural Resources Defense Council, said many scientists have long had concerns about the direction of the plan. Swanson is not involved in the independent Delta board. She expressed concern about the water agencies' apparent control over science within the plan.

"They're asking to be the fox guarding the henhouse," she said, "at the exclusion of the already quite heavy scientific program that already exists."

"I think they want to find a way to prove their point," Swanson added. "That is not how science works. You don't approach science saying, 'This is the answer I want.' "

Karla Nemeth, a spokeswoman for the California Natural Resources Agency, said additional portions of the draft plan that have not yet been released will clarify a stronger relationship between the plan and the existing science efforts.

Those new portions of the plan could come out as soon as next month.

"I would say we totally agree (with the science board) on many points," Nemeth said. "It's not just coordination

with science - it's integrated science." The commitment to base the tunnels plan on science continues to stand, she said.