

Delta plan still evolving as more is learned

William Stelle Jr., Sacramento Bee, 5-19-13

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An April 25 Viewpoints article, "Twin tunnels water grab is doomed to fail," noted a number of concerns with the Bay Delta Conservation Plan, citing the comments of the National Marine Fisheries Service on how to improve the current draft. The agency offers additional thoughts on the state's plan for the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

Salmon are an iconic species in California, vital to the economy of many coastal communities. But the status quo for these fish in the Delta is deadly. Sixty percent of the juvenile Sacramento River salmon and 95 percent of the juvenile San Joaquin River salmon entering the Delta don't make it out alive. These are dismal numbers, especially when we're trying to rebuild salmon populations and restore the health of the Delta ecosystem.

The National Marine Fisheries Service is deeply engaged in providing technical assistance in the development of the Bay Delta Conservation Plan and believes that the core tenets are grounded in good science. Redoing the basic plumbing is necessary to avoid a disastrous collapse of the existing system when the next catastrophe hits, and thus to secure a reliable water delivery system for the next generation.

Placing new water intakes in the north Delta in an area with dominant downstream flows is essential for new fish screens to operate correctly and keep salmon on their natural downstream migration. Careful operation of these intakes can significantly reduce the negative impacts of pumping water out of the south Delta. To avoid trading the problems in the south for new ones in the north, we'll need a testing period for the new north Delta intakes and tightly managed bypass flow requirements that ensure sufficient freshwater flows throughout the Delta to support young salmon and the entire ecosystem.

The Bay Delta Conservation Plan also depends upon a significant investment in habitat restoration and clear performance objectives to help guide implementation. The plan now contains these objectives and recognizes floodplain habitats as essential to the growth and survival of juvenile salmon. Yet much is unknown, so we'll need the ability to make adjustments as we learn more to help us achieve these objectives, ensure the restoration programs work as designed and produce meaningful contributions to rebuilding a healthy Delta.

The BDCP process provides for expanded public engagement to improve the plan and keeps open the option of smaller tunnels and other refinements. If you think the draft needs changing, participate in this public process and make your case. But we should be wary of simple solutions: A durable strategy for California water must be an "all-of-the-above" strategy.

The problems facing the Delta are multi-faceted and so must be the solutions. The plan must include new Delta plumbing, new water operations and restored habitats, and reduced predation and invasive species. Other essential efforts, like increased water conservation, aggressive demand management and new storage, may lie outside the plan, but they remain core components of the state's larger integrated water resource plan.

Significant progress has been made in the draft plan and the fishery agencies have suggested further refinements. Is there agreement on all these points? No. Are there legitimate scientific uncertainties which underlie the active issues? Absolutely. Do we think the BDCP as currently drafted is a done deal? No. Are the involved agencies and others fully engaged to tackle and resolve these issues? Yes.

The current collaboration among the many participants is a good example of a complex planning process working as it should. Let's stay focused, work hard and get the job done, based upon good science and good sense.