

State plunges ahead to build twin tunnels

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The California Department of Water Resources is plunging ahead with setting up a design and construction office to oversee building two massive twin water tunnels to suck fresh water from the Sacramento River before it can flow naturally into the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta and divert it to the State Water Project and the federal Central Valley Project.

The decision is revealed in a memo to DWR employees from department Director Mark Cowin, a copy of which was obtained by CVBT.

Cost of the plan has been estimated by outside economists as high as \$67 billion, including interest on the money borrowed to pay for it.

The tunnels are at the heart of the controversial Bay Delta Conservation Plan, which is still undergoing review of its latest, 40,000-page environmental impact report and statement.

The move by DWR is being criticized.

“It is absolutely ridiculous to me,” says Barbara Barrigan-Parrilla, executive director of the environmental group Restore the Delta, who says she has seen the memo, which she apparently obtained from a source different than CVBT’s.

“The project is only 10 percent completed in design, we haven’t gone through permitting, we don’t even have an approved project, but they’re moving forward to create agencies to implement the project. It to me indicates how desperate they are to steamroll the Delta,” she says.

The DWR is planning to set up what Mr. Cowin calls a “Delta Conveyance Facility Design and Construction Enterprise” that will be within the Department of Water Resources as a new program to support activities associated with design and construction of the 35-mile long twin tunnels.

Despite it being a unit of the state, the “enterprise” will be run by a private contractor and staffed with individuals from within DWR, participating regional and local public water agencies, and private consulting firms, the memo says.

“As part of DWR, it will have the capacity to issue contracts for consulting services as well as construction, using DWR’s authority and in keeping with all applicable State contracting statutes,” says the memo.

In addition, says the Cowin memo, a new BDCP office will be established within the executive division of DWR. Its initial focus will be completion of the conservation plan while providing early coordination and transition to implementation of BDCP conservation measures, “including, for example, tidal marsh restoration, Yolo Bypass fishery enhancement and urban stormwater treatment.”

Because this will require “the needed close coordination with the Governor’s Office and the State administration, the office will initially be led by the Chief Deputy Director,” says the memo.

“This office will lay the foundation for the implementation of BDCP, and once the BDCP is finalized, that work will be merged into the formal BDCP Implementation Office,” Mr. Cowin’s memo says.

Nancy Vogel, chief spokeswoman for DWR, says she does not know how much of the existing DWR budget, including money and staff, will be diverted to the two offices; what prompted the decision to move forward with the two offices or how many additional staff have been or will be hired to staff the offices.