

Video simulation captures scale of Delta tunnel project

Matt Weiser, Sacramento Bee, 5-22-14

The water diversion tunnels that Gov. Jerry Brown proposes to build in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta are so large that many policymakers and citizens have had difficulty grasping the project. The Delta Protection Commission set out to change that.

The commission, a state agency that represents local communities in the Delta, hired a computer artist to prepare a video simulation of the three intakes on the Sacramento River that would feed the two proposed tunnels. The result is a 46-second animation on YouTube that gives the impression of a helicopter ride above the intakes and the region near Courtland, in Sacramento County, where they are proposed.

“There might be modest differences of opinion in what a particular structure would look like, but in terms of the size of them, I think we nailed that right on,” said Eric Vink, the commission’s executive director. “I think others will find it interesting.”

The tunnels and intakes are part of the \$25 billion Bay Delta Conservation Plan, a contentious proposal to re-engineer water management in the Delta. The project also includes 100,000 acres of habitat restoration and other projects. The California Department of Water Resources is in charge of the project, and a final decision is anticipated late this year or early next year.

The goal of the project is to balance water demand with wildlife restoration. The Delta is a source of drinking water for 25 million Californians and irrigation for 3 million acres of farmland. It is the largest estuary on the West Coast of the Americas and home to dozens of threatened and endangered species.

Among other things, the video illustrates that the middle of the three intakes would dwarf the town of Clarksburg, which lies directly across the Sacramento River on the Yolo County side. It also depicts how roads and levees will be reconfigured, and the scale and nature of changes to the riverfront at each intake.

The Delta Protection Commission – even though some of its members are appointed by the governor – has emerged as a significant rival to the tunnel plan. Most of its members are local politicians who represent cities and counties in the Delta that would be directly affected by the project. The commission voted last year to formally oppose the tunnels, although it has no authority to prevent it.

The commission paid a consultant about \$4,000 to produce the animation as well as several static images of what the intake locations look like before, during and after construction. Vink said the commission paid for the work because it felt the illustrations in the project’s environmental impact study were not adequate.

“We felt it just didn’t really give a good sense of what this would look like on the landscape, and especially the scale of it on the landscape,” he said. “We think it’s pretty helpful for interests in the Delta to have an understanding of the magnitude and scale of what’s being contemplated here.”

Vink said his agency checked the imagery with officials at DWR, who verified its accuracy.

DWR spokeswoman Nancy Vogel, however, said her agency does have some concerns about the images. She said DWR is now working to produce its own versions based on conceptual engineering documents, which should reveal construction details more precisely.

“It’s not something we found to be an accurate representation, and we’ll have our own in a few weeks,” Vogel said. “It’ll be very concise, not an artist’s representation. We’re well aware there is high interest in how things look.”