

MWD will try to buy delta islands for water storage, habitat purposes

Bettina Boxall, Los Angeles Times, 11-11-15

The board of the Southland's water importer Tuesday voted to pursue the purchase of four farm islands in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, the ecologically troubled center of California's sprawling water system.

The islands would put the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California in control of about 20,000 acres of land in the delta, a source of water for a majority of Californians and a bottleneck in shipments of Northern California supplies to San Joaquin Valley farms and Southern California cities.

The acreage is owned by a private company that has long sought to develop a water storage project on the islands: Bacon Island, Webb Tract, Bouldin Island and Holland Tract. A portion of Chipps Island would also be part of the deal.

But MWD officials say storage is only one of the ways the property could be managed to provide water supply and environmental benefits.

"We believe there's a lot of potential value in these islands," said MWD general manager Jeffrey Kightlinger. "We've been trying to wrestle with these delta problems for decades."

Crucially for the agency, two of the islands are in the path of a proposed water tunnel system that MWD and other water districts are backing. MWD ownership would eliminate the need for lengthy eminent domain proceedings and ease access for construction crews. "It would make it easier to build the tunnels," Kightlinger said after the board meeting.

MWD would also acquire water rights with the land, but Kightlinger said they were not significant from a supply standpoint.

More important, he said, was the opportunity to create fish and wildlife habitat on the islands and use releases of stored water to keep endangered native fish away from the powerful export pumps in the south delta. Fish movement is influenced by salinity and turbidity levels, and when delta smelt and migrating salmon get too close to the pumps, water exports are restricted.

Habitat improvements could also help meet requirements to offset the environmental impacts of burrowing two massive water tunnels under the delta to transport Sacramento River supplies to southbound pumps.

"We really see the long-term value here as the potential ability to transform the lands into something that is more protective of our long-term interests with the environmental benefits and mitigation requirements," Kightlinger said.

The board authorized staff members to negotiate a purchase option with Delta Wetlands Properties, which is owned by a subsidiary of a Swiss insurance company, Zurich Insurance Group. Possible terms were not disclosed, but based on delta land prices, the price tag could be about \$200 million.

MWD is talking to some southern San Joaquin Valley water districts about joining the deal, but their participation is not certain, Kightlinger said.

Delta farmers are bitterly opposed to the tunnels and have always warily eyed MWD and other agencies that take supplies from the delta.

But delta land owner Tom Zuckerman, a longtime player in delta politics, doubted the change of ownership would have much of an effect. He even saw a potential upside.

"I hope the new owners will develop a better feeling for their responsibilities in the delta for levee maintenance and water quality," Zuckerman said. "They'll have a large stake.

"I'm not overly concerned about it," he said. "Cautiously optimistic, you might say."