

With environmental review finalized, could construction on the Delta tunnels begin in 2018?

Ryan Sabalow, The Sacramento Bee, 12-22-16

After years of planning, officials have finalized all 97,000 pages of environmental documents to support Gov. Jerry Brown's controversial plan to build two massive tunnels through the heart of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

In spite of a recent call for a scaled-down version of the project from a prominent nonpartisan California water think-tank, state officials are moving forward with the original plan for what they call California WaterFix. The \$15.5 billion project would tunnel two pipes 40 feet in diameter for 35 miles under the fragile ecosystem that serves as the hub of the state's water-delivery network.

The final environmental impact statement offered few changes from draft documents released in 2015. State officials said the primary difference was that it included responses and minor revisions prompted by more than 30,000 public comments.

"California WaterFix is moving forward at a really quick clip," said Erin Mellon, a spokeswoman for Brown's Natural Resources Agency. "We're just really excited to be able to tout that we've done our due diligence and WaterFix is able to achieve those coequal goals of water supply reliability and ecosystem health of the Delta."

Mellon said that with documents finalized, state officials hope to have federal permits approved next year and construction underway as early as 2018.

Other regulatory, legal and political hurdles still stand in the way, however.

The State Water Resources Control Board, which oversees water rights and water quality in the Delta, is conducting grueling hearings on how the tunnels would affect water users and the environment. Those hearings are expected to last well into next year.

Brown's administration had hoped to secure environmental approvals from two federal agencies that supervise endangered fish species found in the Delta by the time President Barack Obama leaves office in January. State officials told The Sacramento Bee earlier this year that they believed it was crucial to get those approvals before Obama left office or they'd risk losing momentum on the entire project. It's not clear whether a Donald Trump administration would support the tunnels.

The tunnels project also is fiercely opposed by many environmental groups and Delta landowners who describe it as a "water grab" by powerful Southern California. They say the tunnels would lead to further problems for the ecosystem and would harm the water supply for Delta farmers and local cities. They're already gearing up for legal challenges.

"We will begin digging through the information, evaluating agency replies to public comments included in this document, engage in the process moving forward and prepare for litigation if required," said Barbara Barrigan-Parrilla of Restore the Delta, one of the fiercest opponents of the project, in a prepared statement.

State officials say WaterFix wouldn't harm local water users, and would repair the Delta's fragile ecosystem while shoring up reliability of water deliveries to farms in the San Joaquin Valley and to the 25 million people in the Bay Area and Southern California who receive a portion of their drinking water from the Delta.

The giant pumping stations near Tracy have degraded fish populations to the point that water deliveries frequently have to be throttled back to comply with the Endangered Species Act. That means millions of gallons of water pours into the Pacific Ocean instead of getting pumped south, to the irritation of south-of-Delta cities and agricultural water agencies who are expected to finance the project.