

Obama says full speed ahead on Delta tunnels project

Dale Kasler and Ryan Sabalow, The Sacramento Bee, 1-4-17

Two weeks before President Barack Obama leaves office, his administration vowed to move full speed ahead on California's controversial Delta tunnels project, calling it essential for the state's water supply as well as its environment.

Interior Secretary Sally Jewell issued an order Wednesday directing federal officials to complete a preliminary environmental review this month of the massive twin tunnels proposed for the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. She also ordered them to work with California officials on related projects aimed at restoring water quality and habitat for Delta smelt and other endangered fish species in Central Valley river basins that have been pushed to the brink of extinction in recent years.

Jewell's order acknowledged that Obama's time in Washington is running out and that his successor will have final say on whether the \$15.5 billion tunnels project, known as California WaterFix, becomes reality. The final federal review of the tunnels won't occur until April, when Donald Trump occupies the White House. Trump has said he wants to see more water delivered to California's arid San Joaquin Valley farm belt but hasn't specifically addressed the tunnels proposal.

Nonetheless, Jewell's order brings renewed urgency to the project, which has been on the drawing boards for years, and could sharpen debate over the plan.

California officials had expressed concern that the transition to a new administration in Washington, regardless of who was elected, would delay or potentially kill the project. Gov. Jerry Brown, the proposal's leading champion, applauded Jewell's directive and her commitment "to a timely review of the California WaterFix project."

Brown's administration has said groundbreaking could begin in 2018, the governor's final year in office, and Jewell's order signals that crucial decisions about the tunnels could be made in the coming months.

"It's certainly far from a green light for the project," said Doug Obegi of the Natural Resources Defense Council, which has been critical of the tunnels. But "it means we're headed toward a decision."

Like Brown, the Obama administration is trying to strike an elusive balance – addressing long-standing degradation of the Delta's fragile ecosystem while pushing forward with a re-engineering of the estuary that is opposed by many environmentalists, Delta landowners and local officials. Jewell's written directive said her agency is trying to advance "the needs of agriculture and municipalities, while simultaneously fostering conservation of species."

Her order comes at a pivotal time. Aside from the tunnels project, the political and regulatory climate is getting increasingly complicated in the Delta, which is the hub of the elaborate plumbing network that moves water north to south in California.

Obama just signed a bill aimed at increasing water shipments from Northern California to farms and cities in the San Joaquin Valley and Southern California. Yet California's powerful State Water Resources Control Board is moving toward imposing stricter environmental standards that would send more water flowing from the Delta to

the ocean specifically to benefit fish and wildlife – and leave less water available for pumping. It remains unclear what will happen when and if the new federal law collides with state regulations.

As it is, the giant pumps that deliver water from the Delta frequently are dialed back because of concerns over smelt and other fish protected by the Endangered Species Act. Brown's plan would re-engineer that system, diverting a portion of the Sacramento River's supply at a point upstream, near Courtland, and shipping it to the Tracy pumps via a pair of underground tunnels 40 feet in diameter. By dramatically altering water flows in the estuary, administration officials say the tunnels would reduce harm to fish and enable pumping to proceed more reliably to 25 million residents in Southern California and the Bay Area, as well as millions of acres of farmland.

Brown's administration also has said the project wouldn't result in actual increases in Delta pumping – and that's making it harder for project proponents to push the tunnels over the finish line. The stricter environmental rules contemplated by state officials mean water deliveries could decrease even if the tunnels are in place. Because of that, the project still lacks financial commitments from the south-of-Delta water agencies that are responsible for paying for the tunnels.

Other hurdles abound. Environmentalists – who would prefer to see the Delta's problems solved through more stringent conservation strategies and cutbacks in water deliveries to Southern California – maintain the tunnels would mean more harm for fish, not less. Delta farmers and the area's elected officials call the project a "water grab" to help Southern California. Practically everyone opposed to the plan vows to file lawsuits to keep the tunnels from ever happening.

"It's more of the same," said George Hartmann, a lawyer who represents Delta farmers, when asked about Jewell's order. "It's just more things to litigate quicker."

For supporters of the project, Jewell's directive marked one more step forward in a decadelong quest. Water agencies already have spent more than \$200 million on planning costs.

"The order is a nice indication that the federal government takes this last quarter of a billion we spent trying to get this thing permitted seriously," said Jeffrey Kightlinger, who heads the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, one of the chief proponents of the tunnels plan. "And it's sort of like a road map for the Trump transition team and the Interior (Department) to look to.

"Obviously, at the end of the day, if they follow that road map it's up to them."

Although Trump hasn't committed to the project, experts say his pledge to deliver more water to San Joaquin Valley farmers, and more generally his support for major infrastructure projects, could make him a natural ally.

The state Department of Water Resources is directing the tunnels project and released its final environmental impact statement last month. But the project can't go forward until federal agencies issue a declaration that the project can operate without violating the Endangered Species Act. That declaration can't be issued until the environmental reviews are performed – the reviews Jewell insisted must be completed by April.