

Delta dying a death of unyielding spin

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It is often said that the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta is California's version of the Everglades.

Increasingly, however, this vast estuary resembles a gigantic spin machine – a whirlpool of hype and misinformation.

Last Friday, the National Academy of Sciences released the first part of a \$1.5 million study, requested by U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein, on the science that has led federal wildlife agencies to limit water pumping from the Delta to help prop up plunging stocks of fish.

The report was barely released before various interests and politicians rushed to reinterpret its core findings.

Certain environmental groups claimed the science panel had validated the need for greatly reduced water diversions from the Delta. Farm interests seized on parts of the report that questioned certain federal actions aimed at protecting fish.

Cut through the fog and you'll find the National Academy's panel offered a much more nuanced bottom line.

Overall, the panel found that most of the actions by federal agencies to reduce water diversions were "scientifically justified," based on current understanding of this complex ecosystem.

But the panel also noted that much integrated analysis is needed to better understand this system.

No surprise there. Scientists who participated in the ill-fated CalFed effort have been saying the same for years.

Feinstein and groups representing big water diverters had hoped the panel would go further and buttress their efforts to suspend two biological opinions that have restricted water diversions. For months, farm groups have been claiming that smelt and other fish haven't responded to the federal restrictions, and so they don't work.

To its credit, the panel declared the obvious – it's unrealistic to expect measurable improvements for fish after only one full year, especially when there are so few smelt left to measure.

The National Academy panel will now complete the second part of its review, which is expected to take 20 months and cost another \$750,000.

That report will examine the array of factors – not just water diversions – that are harming the Delta and complicating water shipments.

Twenty months is long time. Perhaps the Delta combatants can spend it developing a Bay Delta Conservation Plan that results in long-term solutions for water conveyance and restoration of this estuary.

The spin cycle is getting wearisome, and it's doing little to help fish, fowl or farmers.