

Governor drops 'bomb' on Delta

He angers local officials by declaring state clear to build peripheral canal

Alex Breitler, Stockton Record, 11-5-09

STOCKTON - Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger came to plug electric vehicles at a new manufacturing plant, but in the process he stunned local officials by saying that a water agreement by legislators early Wednesday will allow the state to "fix the Delta and to build a canal around the Delta."

It's well-known that Schwarzenegger supports a peripheral canal, but Wednesday's comment - one of his most direct endorsements to date - stung in Stockton, the heart of anti-canal country.

He spoke at the grand opening for Electric Vehicles International, near the Port of Stockton.

"You don't come in our backyard, where you could spit and hit the Delta, and tell us he's going to put the canal in without really understanding the impacts," said San Joaquin County Supervisor Leroy Ornellas, who was invited to Wednesday's ceremony but had to cancel after it was delayed to accommodate the governor's news conference in Sacramento.

The package of bills, finished by legislators at 6 a.m. Wednesday, does not explicitly authorize a canal to send water past, rather than through, the Delta. It would, however, delegate future Delta decisions - including a canal, which is already being studied - to a new seven-member council, with four members appointed by the governor.

That's only one part of the package, which also includes new requirements to conserve water and monitor groundwater use. A divided Assembly finished its all-night marathon by approving an \$11.1 billion bond which, pending the governor's approval, will go before voters in November 2010.

In Stockton, Schwarzenegger said California has needed a water supply upgrade for decades.

But the package also addresses the environment, he told a crowd of about 100 local business leaders and dignitaries.

"Why it has to do with the environment is because we're also going to, part of this package is to fix the Delta and to build a canal around the Delta, so it is something that is to restore the environment again and make sure California has enough water," the governor said.

"That was great news this morning," he added.

Stockton Mayor Ann Johnston, who stood at Schwarzenegger's side as he spoke, raised her eyebrows at the mention of a canal.

"Maybe that's just his way of bringing it home, saying this is going to happen and he hopes we all roll over," Johnston said later.

"It was a bomb," she said.

Douglass Wilhoit, CEO of the Greater Stockton Chamber of Commerce, said he was disappointed.

"There's a right time and a right place for everything," he said. "The right time to celebrate EVI was today, not to address the very faulty and incomplete water legislation which we fear does not go far enough to protect and restore the Delta."

Schwarzenegger did not take questions from the media at his Stockton showing. His office had not responded Wednesday evening to a request to clarify his remarks.

At a Sacramento news conference earlier Wednesday, the governor called the water deal the most comprehensive in state history.

"If you think about it, this will build water storage above the ground and below the ground, this will build the canal in order to protect the Delta, this will fix the Delta," he said.

A spokeswoman for state Sen. Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto, who wrote the bill establishing the new council, confirmed there is no authorization for a canal.

"I think that was the governor getting a little excited," spokeswoman Melissa Figueroa said.

The previous night, Delta legislators argued with colleagues that creating a new council would give away lawmakers' ability to decide on a canal when the studies are done.

An amendment by Assemblywoman Alyson Huber, D-El Dorado Hills, that would require a legislative vote before a canal could be approved, was killed by the Assembly about 10 p.m. Tuesday.

Another canal opponent, Republican Bill Berryhill of Ceres, decried what he considered a rush job to create a new bureaucracy.

"Here we are in the dead of night, and there's no deadline like there is on the budget," he said. "For God's sake, we ought to be dealing with it tomorrow with a clear head and clear minds. This process is horrible."

But other lawmakers said that after decades of inaction, water couldn't wait another day. They spoke of struggles in the south San Joaquin Valley, to which water deliveries were cut this year partly because of drought and partly to protect endangered Delta fish.

In theory, a canal would alleviate this problem by sending water around the Delta so that fish aren't killed in the large pumps near Tracy.

"Let's be real," said Assemblyman Juan Arambula, D-Fresno. "If we reject this, the people of California are going to hold us accountable. We have a 13-percent approval rating for one reason: We're not willing to deal with the tough issues the state faces."

Assemblyman Jared Huffman, D-San Rafael, denied repeated claims that Delta advocates were left out of the process as the legislation was crafted.

"Interests in the Delta may not have gotten everything they wanted, but at the end of the day some of them simply don't want change," he said.

The stickiest issue was the bond, on which the Assembly voted for the first time at 3:30 a.m. Wednesday. It passed with two-thirds majority at 6 a.m.

The water package was notable for its wide range of supporters, including many water districts, both Northern and Southern California lawmakers and some environmental groups, though the latter are split on the issue of a canal.

Supporters of the council say it will be an added check on the 49-mile canal, which the administration has said it can pursue even without legislative action.