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Spotlight on delta in coming state water fight

Kelly Zito, Chronicle Staff Writer

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With the bruising battle over the state budget barely over, a new fight looming in the Capitol promises to be just as ugly.

At stake is nothing less than the replumbing of California's water system, a complicated, aging network of pipes, canals and pumps that has watered America's breadbasket, fueled the largest population in the union and given rise to one of the world's most prosperous economies.

Perhaps never before in the Golden State's history has it been more clear that the system is profoundly broken and at risk of outright collapse. And experts agree that this may be the year the state's leaders finally dole out much-needed fixes.

The anticipated debate centers on the deteriorating Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, the scenic network of islands, channels and wetlands that funnels water to two-thirds of California, including much of the Bay Area.

Over-pumping at the confluence of the two rivers, rising pollution levels and the decline of several key fish species have pushed the heart of the state's waterworks to the brink, according to a parade of experts. Add to that an ongoing drought and hairline cracks in the system have become gaping faults: Cities across the state have imposed mandatory rationing, hundreds of thousands of farmland acres have gone unplanted and water managers are scrambling to find new supplies.

Against that backdrop, officials at nearly every level of government are now paying attention: local officials, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and President Obama, who sent Interior Secretary Ken Salazar in April to tour the delta.

Later this month, Sacramento lawmakers are set to hold hearings on five bills intended to increase water conservation, improve the monitoring of who uses water and how much, and to create a politically appointed council that would have broad authority over the delta, including the ability to approve a controversial pipeline around the estuary.

"There's never been a moment where there was more uncertainty and more focus on the future of the delta and the water system," said Barry Nelson, water policy analyst at the Natural Resources Defense Council. "The stars only align on a complicated issue like water every decade. We're at one of those moments."

Historic steps

Gold miners, ranchers and urban dwellers for generations have scuffled over divvying up the precious drops that fall in the Sierra Nevada. In this round, however, the ante is far higher - an ecosystem in free fall, an erratic water supply and potentially billions of taxpayer dollars.

Scientists, water managers, businesses and lawmakers agree any solution to the water crisis must achieve two goals: Repair the delta ecosystem and bolster the reliability of California's water supply.

That's where the agreement ends.

Schwarzenegger has embraced an ambitious project that would route water around the delta. Such a "peripheral canal" would be the biggest overhaul of the system since the massive state and federal water projects were undertaken 50 and 75 years ago, respectively.

Backers include Southern California cities and the agriculture industry, which hope such a system would boost water supplies after three parched years and pumping restrictions designed to protect a disappearing delta fish.

Though there are no firm details on location or size, some cost estimates for the project run as high as $15 billion.

"We need to have a comprehensive delta plan, and conveyance has to be a part of it," said Joe Grindstaff, deputy secretary for water policy in the state's Natural Resources Agency.

Delta concerns

Others say the state must pursue water conservation, recycling and desalting ocean water just as aggressively. What's more, they charge the governor with using the plight of some Central Valley farmers - whose fallowed fields and out-of-work field workers have garnered nationwide media attention - to advance his case for a canal.

"The idea that some pipe or canal is a silver bullet to our problems in the delta is misguided. The governor has been fixated on that in a way that's not helpful," said Assemblyman Jared Huffman, D-San Rafael.

State Sen. Lois Wolk, D-Davis, represents four of the five delta counties. Building a canal through the region of 500,000 residents could potentially wreak havoc on the economic, cultural and social fabric of the community, she said.

In theory, rerouting water through a pipe from the Sacramento River at the northern delta to pumps in the southern delta would reduce man-made pressures on the ecosystem- sucking fewer fish into giant water outtake pipes, for instance - while at the same time creating a dedicated pipeline that would send water to cities from San Jose to San Diego.

Wolk and others fear that redirecting the Sacramento River would allow saltwater to overwhelm the delta, provide less freshwater to flush pollutants out of the estuary, ruin recreational boating and fishing and destroy a major source of irrigation water for delta farmers.

"For most people in the Legislature and the state, the delta is a blank slate on the map," Wolk said. "It's my job to argue for the delta's complexity and for assurances that the delta will survive."

Water proposals

State Democrats last week introduced a set of five bills intended to fix California's water crisis:

SB12 (Sen. Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto) - The bill would create the Delta Stewardship Council, a seven-member body that would have broad oversight of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta and the ability to approve a so-called peripheral canal. Four of the members would be appointed by the governor; one each by the state Assembly and Senate. The remaining member would represent the delta community.

AB39 (Assemblyman Jared Huffman, D-San Rafael) - The bill would require the council to adopt a management

plan for the delta with two main goals: repairing the ecosystem and improving the state's water supply.

AB49 (Assemblymen Mike Feuer, D-Los Angeles, and Huffman) - This bill would require more aggressive water conservation statewide, including a 20 percent reduction in urban per capita water use by Dec. 31, 2020.

SB229 (Sen. Fran Pavley, D-Agoura Hills (Los Angeles County) - This bill would strengthen monitoring of groundwater use as well as water diversions from rivers and streams.

SB458 (Sen. Lois Wolk, D-Davis) - The bill would establish the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta Conservancy to protect the environment and economy of the delta community.

E-mail Kelly Zito at kzito@sfchronicle.com.

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