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Opinion

Plans for the San Joaquin delta meld policy with plumbing

An overall strategy to manage the hub of the state's water supply finally has it right.

By Timothy F. Brick

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Ageneration ago, Southern California water managers thought they had the solution for dealing with the hub of the state's water system -- the magnificent Northern California estuary known as the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. They wanted to build a canal from the delta to the existing aqueduct system that sustains San Joaquin Valley agriculture and Southern California.

They were wrong. And now we finally have the chance to do it right.

Five draft bills as part of an overall plan have been introduced in the Legislature that could lead to better governance in the delta and wise water management statewide. Like all drafts, some areas need refining. Like all complex packages, there are voices calling to delay and to defer. But delaying and deferring are no longer options. The Legislature in the coming weeks must put the delta on a path to recovery for the sake of the environment and the state's $1.8-trillion economy.

In 1982, I was an activist and among the critics who successfully fought the so-called peripheral canal in a historic statewide election. Why? The solution's sole purpose was water supply. There was no visible effort to conserve water, to diversify supplies through recycling or to restore the delta itself. To paraphrase a fellow critic, the plan was all plumbing and no policy.

The Legislature now finds itself in another delta debate brought to the forefront by a generation of gridlock, half-steps and a true environmental crisis. That has brought us to these new plans for a delta water conveyance system -- whether it will be a canal, a tunnel or some combination is still to be decided. But this time, there is also a plan to mandate water conservation statewide and one to bring water management and the collection of water-use information into the 21st century.

Most important, there is a proposal to restore tens of thousands of acres of delta habitat to provide much-needed shelter and food for salmon and other threatened species. Its scope and sophistication are precisely what the delta needs at this critical moment. Dwindling fish populations have triggered new and extraordinary delta water-supply restrictions. They threaten to indefinitely keep Southern California and much of the state in shortage or near-shortage conditions.

There is no hiding that "the canal" remains a lightning rod, given the 1982 battle, which was arguably the most regionally divisive issue in state history. Any sustainable conveyance system, which would be funded by the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California and other water agencies and not the state general fund, needs to be

large enough to capture some of the runoff during the occasional big storms. The system, however, also has to be carefully operated and legally linked to a real habitat strategy for the delta.

California has never had a comprehensive plan like this for the delta. But it will, hopefully by the end of 2010, in conjunction with the Legislature and through a state and federal effort known as the Bay Delta Conservation Plan, which is supported by several key environmental groups and many water districts. The BDCP's goal isn't just bare-bones compliance with the Endangered Species Act but rather species recovery, the highest bar of any environmental law in the country.

As the provider of delta water supplies to a six-county region, the MWD seeks to meet and exceed that goal. We also support legislation mandating statewide water conservation, including more in our own backyard, better reporting of water use and better science in the delta.

Southern California doesn't seek more water from the delta. But it is obvious that a major investment in a new and better way to move water supplies across the delta is necessary to maintain something close to our traditional supply. The alternative is to risk losing this supply altogether through additional environmental restrictions or a collapse of the system from a large earthquake that seismologists predict for the coming decades. The region's water system depends on reliable baseline supplies to make emerging strategies work, such as recycling, conservation and groundwater cleanup.

For the delta, chances like this don't come along very often. We've never seen an entire package like this that advances water policy and makes the responsible plumbing changes. We're at the brink of a sustainable water future for California -- if we seize the moment.

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