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# Delta 'bypass' a cure for its ills

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Southern California Water Committee Chairman Charles Wilson caught everyone's attention at the third annual San Bernardino Water Conference when he likened California's water delivery system to a sick patient in desperate need of a coronary bypass operation.

"The heart of this patient needs a bypass surgery in the worst possible way," Wilson said during the Aug. 20 conference. He was talking about the need for a peripheral canal around the troubled Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. The analogy couldn't be more on target.

More than 25 million people, or two-thirds of California's population, depend to varying degrees on the water that flows through the Delta. Its waters also provide the lifeblood for much of the state's agribusiness and countless other industries that make California the eighth-largest economy in the world. In San Bernardino County, we depend on Delta water because our local water needs far outstrip the runoff we receive from our local mountains. In fact, without Delta water, San Bernardino Valley Municipal Water District would be hard pressed to satisfy the needs of 13 local water agencies from Rialto to Yucaipa and their 700,000 business and residential customers, let alone maintain the integrity of local groundwater basins.

So when a federal judge ordered a 30 percent cutback in Delta water deliveries two years ago to protect the delta smelt, a small fish, many water agencies in San Bernardino County and throughout Central and Southern California had no choice but to impose immediate water restrictions.

The problems involving the Delta are complex. While some argue that water exports threaten the delta smelt and other endangered fish, others assert that these fish are equally threatened by contaminated runoff from agriculture, wastewater treatment plant discharges and invasive non-native species, which compete with smelt and other fish species for food. Another problem involves the Delta's antiquated system of levees, which could easily fail during an earthquake or flood, resulting in ocean water rushing into vast areas of the Delta, leaving large parts of California without an adequate water supply for months or years.

Given the magnitude of these problems, many argue that the best way to maintain the Delta's viability as an ecological and water resource is simply to bypass the existing network of canals with a new canal or perhaps even a tunnel, which would enable the state to better control water flows in and around the Delta for the benefit of both fish and people.

Unfortunately, every plan to re-route water supplies around the Delta is met with some level of opposition from sports fishermen,

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environmental groups or local interests who seem to be more interested in doing nothing rather than taking concrete steps to address the biggest single threat facing Californians and the state's economy, which is continued cutbacks in Delta water deliveries.

To make matters worse, the courts are clogged with lawsuits that have been filed by state, federal and local agencies as well as environmental organizations, further complicating efforts to restore the flow of Delta water throughout the state.

But while it may be tempting for some to simply give up on the idea of waging a political battle to ensure that an alternative conveyance system is put in place to protect the long-term viability of the Delta, water agencies in Southern California and throughout the state know this is one battle we cannot afford to lose.

"We cannot give up on our imported water supply," said Brian Thomas, assistant general manager and chief financial officer of Metropolitan Water District, in his remarks to water conference attendees.

Kirby Brill, general manager of Mojave Water Agency, made a similar call to action. "I challenge everybody not to give up on the Delta," he said, adding, "We really need to step up and make sure our voice is heard in this `fixing the Delta' discussion."

As the largest provider of imported water in San Bernardino County, we at San Bernardino Valley Municipal Water District also believe that it is critical that our elected representatives act now to ensure that an alternative conveyance or "bypass" system is built to ensure the long-term viability of Delta water supplies.

*Douglas Headrick, deputy general manager of San Bernardino Valley Municipal Water District, was a panelist at the San Bernardino County Water Conference.*

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