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Editorial

Water wisdom for California

As state lawmakers rush to meet a deadline on water bills, urgency must not overtake good policy.

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As a handful of Assembly members and state senators hunker down over the Labor Day weekend in a legislative conference committee to work on bills to fix California's long-standing water problems, this page is rooting for the effort. But apprehensively.

Certainly the state needs smart and swift action on water. The Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta ecosystem is collapsing, and if it finally goes, the damage won't be limited to a few fish; it would mean losing much of the freshwater supply to millions of residents and farmers. Our water woes, exacerbated now by a continuing drought, require focused attention, but not an end-of-session rush job that relies more on deal-making than good policy.

There are some particular emergencies, and solutions, for lawmakers to keep in mind as they bicker over whether to build new dams (with or without any notion of whether there will be enough water to fill them), or a delta-skirting canal (or tunnel), or to establish a new authority with power to cut through the political process.

The most immediate crisis is in the delta itself, that Everglades-like meeting of freshwater and sea that is the key to most of California's parched farmland and millions of its thirsty neighborhoods. Long before a new conveyance system can be funded and built, the state must do something about the existing downstream levees separating bay water and brackish areas from the Sierra snowmelt that is the state's lifeblood. If those aging structures fail -- and it's just a matter of time before an earthquake or other disaster wreaks havoc -- farmers and residents could find they have nothing coming out of the tap. One useful step: Replace the current hodgepodge of public and semi-private agencies that repair and replace levees with a single authority.

Closer to home, Southern California has to tap the virtual river of water that is wasted each day as well as the network of virtual lakes beneath us in the form of groundwater. Lawmakers can also make smart water use a permanent part of the state's culture by enacting into law Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's call to reduce per capita water consumption by 20% by 2020. And the state should show local governments it is prepared to help clean contaminated groundwater to lessen our reliance on imported water.

The virtual river and lakes are a start, but a broader fix is needed. As the conference committee faces a Tuesday deadline to report out a package of bills and a Friday deadline for a final floor vote, members must keep in mind that any dam or canal they authorize will take years to build, and then will have consequences that last, perhaps, forever.

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