CAPITOL WEEKLY
THE NEWSPAPER OF CALIFORNIA GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS

Reliable water for California: BDCP offers a roadmap

By **Laura Moon** | 09/10/09 12:00 AM PST

As Californians, we live in one of the most productive, creative and environmentally diverse places on earth. It is also one of the most complicated – especially when it comes to water.

Today, an unparalleled water crisis grips California, one that threatens farms, industries, the environment and the well-being of communities up and down the state. In response, an unprecedented and far-reaching solution is unfolding through a statewide planning process called the Bay Delta Conservation Plan (BDCP), which has been much discussed in the past few weeks during a series of legislative hearings.

BDCP seeks to create a more modern and stable water supply for California, while protecting and enhancing the environment of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. The Delta is the heart of the state's water supply system, a water "hub" where a portion of freshwater from the Sierra watershed (about 18 percent in an average water year) is routed to 25 million residents, businesses and farms in the Bay Area, Central and Southern California. Recently, the Delta's ecosystem has collapsed due to many factors, while its fragile levees are at risk from earthquakes, sea level rise and floods. The result: fisheries are failing, state and federal water deliveries have been curtailed, and future water supplies are uncertain.

Public water agencies throughout California are expanding conservation and water efficiency programs and searching for innovative ways to increase local supplies. These efforts are incredibly important but they won't be able to replace water supplies for the Bay Area, Central and Southern California if we have a catastrophic failure in the Delta. The Governor and State Legislature certainly recognize this unprecedented crisis and we appreciate their focus and diligence in seeking solutions. We need an effective and achievable long-term solution for California and the Delta that benefits the entire state, and our organization is certainly encouraged with the goals and growing momentum of the BDCP.

The BDCP follows a nationally recognized habitat conservation planning process recommended and encouraged by state and federal endangered species laws. The plan is being developed by a diverse collection of public water agencies, fish biologists, environmentalists, engineers and policy experts. Those involved are committed to the equal goals of creating a more reliable water system and helping fish species recover in the Delta.

The BDCP effort is collaborative, science-based and public. The issues are difficult and often controversial. Perspectives around the table vary widely, leading to candid and lively debate. Out of this transparent process, common ground and real solutions – so elusive in the past – are emerging.

The BDCP will create a permitting process to enable water providers to design a new delivery system that will help protect endangered fish species. This is an important improvement on the "one at a time" approach historically followed by wildlife agencies when issuing permits for projects where an endangered species is involved. In contrast, the BDCP process goes far beyond bare-bones compliance with individual endangered species laws: it aids the recovery of numerous species at once and the restoration of thousands of acres of habitat.

California's existing state and federal water delivery systems were built half a century ago and no longer meet the modern-day economic and environmental needs of the state. A critical element of the BDCP involves the study of a possible new canal or other structure to separate the conveyance of freshwater deliveries from the natural flows in the Delta. The situation is different today than it was a quarter century ago - the last time California considered building a canal. The BDCP represents a far more comprehensive plan, one that would help protect salmon and other fish, and also restore water supplies. A new conveyance structure would be paid for by public water agencies, not the state general fund.

Operating such a structure would involve a delicate balancing act of diverting water out of the Sacramento River when rain and Sierra snowmelt are plentiful, without causing harm to water quality and fish. Currently, studies are underway to determine whether a canal would be an economically and environmentally sound investment. A possible canal is only one component of the BDCP, which includes a long list of measures to enhance the Delta ecosystem.

Redesigning a water system for a state the size of California, with its many environmental challenges, will be no small feat. But as the BDCP will show, such an undertaking is not only possible, but can be intertwined with the equally important task of healing the Delta.

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