News

DELTA PLAN HAS OTHER RISKS

PERIPHERAL CANAL NOT THE ONLY CONTROVERSIAL STRATEGY IN MIND

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STOCKTON - The peripheral canal gets all the publicity, but plans to radically revamp the Delta include other controversial and far-reaching strategies - including converting 80,000 acres of farmland into tidal marsh and flood plain habitat over the next four decades.

Farmers and fishermen argued their opposition on both counts Tuesday as the officials behind the Bay-Delta Conservation Plan visited Stockton to share early drafts of the document, which would give those who export water from the Delta permission under federal law to continue killing endangered fish at the giant pumps near Tracy.

Supporters say the plan is the best opportunity to save fish while stabilizing the state's water supply.

But at whose expense?

The plan calls for re-storation of at least 5,000 acres of marshland in the south Delta, the same area where farmer Cecil Rodgers has tilled the ground for four generations.

"This isn't just a wilderness out there," he said. "There are people. Farmers."

A consultant working on the habitat restoration said the state would seek land from willing participants only and would not exercise eminent domain.

Landowners worry, however, that those standards could change if a new Delta governance structure is put in place, as legislators recently tried unsuccessfully to do.

The farmers worry about proposals to move or breach levees and fret that water flooding onto a willing neighbor's land just might seep onto their own.

What's more, the strategy could interfere with San Joaquin County's own habitat conservation plan, which attempts to keep land in farming while providing habitat for critters that crawl or fly.

"We're an agriculture-based county," said Steve Mayo, senior habitat planner with the San Joaquin Council of Governments. "We want active agriculture. That's what we preserve. The restoration being planned is really to take all that agriculture out."

Tuesday's workshop, which attracted close to 200 participants and included an anti-canal rally earlier in the afternoon, addressed a 200-page draft of just one of what will eventually be 13 chapters.

The canal, as usual, generated the most debate. The 49-mile channel would ship Sacramento River water around the estuary, through four tunnels and siphoned underneath eight rivers and streams. Nineteen new bridges would be built for roads and rail, as well as a new forebay to hold water before it's pumped to south San Joaquin Valley agriculture and Southern California.

Supporters say the canal would save fish from getting sucked into those pumps. Opponents say it would cut off the freshwater that is the lifeblood of the Delta.

In addition to the canal and restoring wetland habitat, the plan would attempt to address discharges from wastewater treatment plants, pesticide use by Delta farmers and mercury contamination.

Bay-Delta spokeswoman Karla Nemeth said she understands that the plan is controversial. She acknowledged it is not just a conservation plan but a water supply plan.

A full draft may be released by early next year.

"Folks are going to have all kinds of opportunities down the road" to comment, she said.

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