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Water in California

Stuck in the Delta

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Californians continue fighting over water, but vow to try making peace

CALIFORNIA'S notoriously partisan lawmakers ended their legislative session in the early morning of September 12th with a frantic but largely futile effort to pass a raft of bills. Among the many bills that failed was a package of five that addressed perhaps California's oldest and most intractable problem: water.

California is in the third year of a drought that exacerbates its constant struggle to expand its economy and population in a climate that is naturally dry. About 75% of the state's rain falls in the northern part, but about 80% of the agricultural and urban demand for water is in the south. As a result, California has over the past century built a mighty infrastructure for moving water. That infrastructure, however, is now creaking and must be fixed.

At its heart is the Delta just south of Sacramento, the largest estuary on the west coast, where the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers and their tributaries meet and flow through a vast web of waterways, sloughs and levees and eventually out through San Francisco's Golden Gate. Along the way, huge amounts of fresh water are diverted and pumped south in two aqueducts—one state-run, the other federal—through the Central Valley, California's fruit basket, and on to the urban sprawl of Los Angeles.

This method has become an ecological disaster. The Delta is a tidal estuary, with changing salinity that has produced a diverse ecosystem including the Delta smelt, a small fish found only there, and the Chinook salmon. The pumps, however, both grind up the fish and disrupt the tidal flows, thus threatening to kill native species and inviting invasive ones. Besides, the levees are old and seismically unsafe. An earthquake could flood much of the Delta, which is below sea level.

A federal court ruling in 2007 gave a victory to environmentalists by reducing the water pumped out of the Delta. Angry farmers are now posting signs on their arid patches of the Central Valley that read "Congress created dust bowl". In desperation, they are also depleting their own groundwater, causing the entire valley floor to sink and possibly making the aqueducts geologically unsafe. An old and controversial idea has therefore been revived: to build a peripheral canal to bypass the Delta and its pumps. Though fiercely opposed by residents of the Delta itself, who fear that their infrastructure will fall into disrepair, this plan is gaining support.

The five bills that have just failed, however, did not even propose this canal. They tried merely to clarify the governance of the Delta, which currently has more than 200 committees, counties, boards and departments squabbling over it, by establishing a new unitary authority. They also demanded stricter water-conservation rules and tried to issue bonds to pay for building and maintaining infrastructure. But Democrats were nervous about repaying such a bond out of general taxes in a state careening from one budget deficit to another, whereas Republicans balked at making farmers and water districts pay.

All is not lost. Jared Huffman, the Democratic assemblyman who is most involved in water legislation, thinks that

a consensus is emerging and “We just need time.” Karen Bass, the speaker of California’s Assembly, is pressing for a special session of the legislature this autumn.

Reform must happen, and the sooner the better, says Ellen Hanak of the non-partisan Public Policy Institute of California, because the state’s problems will only get worse with climate change. Already the snowpack in the Sierra Nevada, the main water storage for the Delta, is shrinking. A dry state is likely only to get drier.

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