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Editorial

Sacramento's water deadline

The governor should give legislators a bit more time to work out a comprehensive plan.

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The Legislature has taken many hits this year for ineptitude and inaction, and much of the criticism is well earned. But amid the fiscal disaster and the delayed response, the Assembly and Senate have moved steadily forward on a solution to the state's decades-long water crisis. That's significant.

After voters rejected a plan to build a peripheral canal near the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta in 1982, California's water arteries were largely neglected, stalemate replaced progress, the delta ecosystem degraded and leadership disappeared. But this year, the Legislature, for all its bumbling, began a swift and deliberate march toward breaking the deadlock. Members deserve credit, and they owe it to the state to keep working.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger too deserves plaudits for making a comprehensive water plan one of his top goals. But, as is typical of this governor, his Jekyll-Hyde nature threatens to undermine the very progress he has spurred. Lawmakers couldn't complete a bill by the deadline for passage last month, and now that Schwarzenegger is the one facing a deadline -- to sign or veto the more than 700 bills on his desk by Sunday -- he has delivered an ultimatum: Reach a water agreement by Friday or he will veto everything and render the entire session a waste. It's as if the plumber arrived to fix Schwarzenegger's kitchen sink and instead of handing him a wrench or getting out of his way, the governor decided to "help" by uttering threats.

Meanwhile, counties and water agencies in the San Francisco Bay Area and around the delta are seeking more time to make their case for better protection of their water rights. If those concerns can be addressed, the final legislation may come a few weeks later than it otherwise might, but it also would stand a better chance of success, bringing with it the support of more key players.

There are two parts to the discussion. The policy portion would update the way the delta and its water resources are governed, establish bold new conservation goals, provide long-needed enforcement of water rights and establish a mechanism for monitoring groundwater use and quality. Contrary to popular belief, it would not authorize a new tunnel or canal, or divert additional water from the delta, although it would establish a framework under which standards would be set for such decisions. The second portion is funding, in the form of a bond, and much of the contention centers on how big that bond would be and who would get the money.

In the midst of the debate, opponents of a deal have reached back a quarter of a century for outdated warnings and images that were so effective in pitting north against south, farms against cities, fish against people. But if those stereotypes ever applied, they don't today.

Southern Californians may be thirsty, but we also are conservationists. In Los Angeles especially, residents have formed the strong and indispensable core of movements to restore resources that our forebears depleted and to reduce household consumption with relatively easy fixes, such as low-flush toilets, and difficult ones, such as letting the grass go brown in the current drought. While hundreds of thousands of households in delta counties still consume water

virtually for nothing, without meters, Los Angeles has begun leading the way on conservation.

The point is not to pit one region against another but to state unequivocally: Southern Californians have shown by their actions a willingness to conserve water and to preserve the environment. The package being hammered out in Sacramento can help.

It would target a 20% reduction in urban water use, city by city, by 2020. Los Angeles and adjacent cities are ready and able, and should step up and show themselves willing, to comply. So should cities in regions without a tradition of conservation; the legislation permits them time to catch up. Exemptions for industry and agriculture are perhaps broader than they should be, but it's important to make a start and to adjust later as necessary.

Although the package does not provide for a canal, it doesn't block one. Some environmentalists and political leaders from the Bay-delta area object that past "conveyances" always have led to an increased flow. Let's be clear: The purpose of any new conveyance to bring water to Southern California from the delta is and should be to protect the complex of inlets, rivers and their fish species, and to secure a reliable -- although not increased -- supply. Water that currently makes its way here would bypass dams, levees and locks that are vulnerable to earthquake and age; officials would be able to adjust flows of different typesand temperatures to protect wildlife and the economically vital fishing industry.

To accommodate a stable, rather than increased, flow, Southern California must rely more on local sources, including groundwater -- and the package that is taking shape helps with that as well by cleaning up contamination.

Urban water users also should support the time-tested method of paying for their portion of California's shared natural resource. Much of the contention in Sacramento focuses on how much of the delta fix should be paid for with a general obligation bond. It's ironic, perhaps, that the Republicans who so often depict themselves as fiscal conservatives favor more long-term obligations from the general fund, while many Democrats prefer revenue bonds paid back by ratepayers. There most likely will be a combination of the two, but lawmakers should stick to this simple rule of thumb: If the money is needed to protect a shared resource, general obligation bonds are the way to go. If it's for one faction or user group, the users should expect to pay.

There is wiggle room in each of these pieces, and that means more time, and more talk, will be needed. The governor should back off and allow lawmakers the additional week or two to craft a package that will work.

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