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Hope for Delta deal

Panel has a protection plan, but canal issue still divisive

By Matt Weiser - Bee Staff Writer

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A surprising degree of consensus is emerging among longtime foes on a plan to protect the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, but battle lines remain visible on the most controversial puzzle piece: a peripheral canal.

Representatives of 41 groups, representing an array of interests, have unveiled a plan they believe will restore the health of the Delta, while maintaining the sensitive ecosystem as a major supplier of water for the south state, and a home to farming and recreation.

The group was appointed to advise a Delta Blue Ribbon Task Force named by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, which met in Sacramento last week. The task force liked what it saw.

"It's a remarkable piece of work," said task force member Ray Seed, a levee expert and UC Berkeley engineering professor.

The task force was created in response to deteriorating conditions in the Delta, which supplies water for 23 million Californians and millions of acres of farmland. The heavy demand for drinking water and irrigation has harmed habitat for six fish species and raised water reliability concerns.

In June, state water export pumps near Tracy were turned off for nine days to protect the Delta smelt, a tiny fish whose numbers have plunged over the past four years. On Friday, a federal judge weighed in, finding that the law requires that something be done to protect the threatened smelt. In a ruling expected to have massive repercussions on San Joaquin Valley farming operations, the judge imposed limits on how much water can be pumped south through the Delta from December, when the fish spawn, until June.

Agreement by the advisory panel is a major step toward a new vision for managing the Delta, since the group's members -- environmentalists, farmers, water users, business and fishing groups -- have fought over its resources for years.

"There's a big difference this time," said Topper van Loben Sels, a Delta farmer and member of the Delta Protection Commission. "It's vital to the state of California that we get this right. If we upset the economy, we're all going to suffer."

The panel's proposal comes in two versions.

Both focus on armoring levees along the Middle River and the South Fork Mokelumne River in a north-south path through the center of the Delta. The goal is to create a corridor within the Delta for Sacramento River water to reach state and federal water pumps near Tracy.

These powerful pumps have been blamed for reversing natural flows and drawing seawater into the Delta, killing fish and altering the habitat. An armored water path might isolate the rest of the Delta from pumping effects so it could be restored.

Both proposals include gates on False River and Old River in the west Delta to control seawater intrusion, and a broad mix of levee improvements and habitat restoration.

Steamboat Slough and Old River would become habitat corridors, while sinking islands in the west Delta might be used to grow tules rather than for farming, helping restore island interiors. Webb Tract and Bacon Island would be studied as water storage facilities.

One version of the plan proposes studying a peripheral canal that would be operated in concert with the armored channel. Some advisory group members believe this "dual facility" approach offers more flexibility.

This is where alliances begin to fracture.

Also known as an isolated conveyance facility, a peripheral canal would divert Sacramento River water directly to the export pumps, bypassing the Delta. The idea was rejected by voters statewide in 1982 amid fears it would give Southern California an open tap to rob north-state water.

Schwarzenegger has put the idea back on the table amid concerns that a massive flood or earthquake could contaminate water exports that now move south through the Delta. A peripheral canal might protect that water in a disaster.

"I think what we see now is the center holding, partly because of the crisis we're facing," said John Cain, director of restoration programs at the Natural Heritage Institute. "If political leadership pushes us too hard toward a dual facility, the center's not going to hold. People will retreat to their camps."

The group wants some of the projects built soon and in a way that is reversible. For instance, salinity gates could be temporary structures. This would allow officials to build them cheaply, test their effectiveness and to remove them easily if they don't work.

Efforts that could begin within a year include developing an emergency plan for the Delta, moving aggressively to control invasive species, and restoring Dutch Slough, Cache Slough and Suisun Marsh.

"I'm really thinking some of these can begin in 90 to 100 days," said Sunne McPeak, a task force member and former secretary of the state Business, Transportation and Housing Agency.

Schwarzenegger appointed the task force to devise a comprehensive fix for the Delta's problems. Its report is due in November.

But some task force members -- including McPeak and chairman Phil Isenberg, a former Democratic assemblyman -- expressed doubt that the state is truly committed to restoring the Delta.

In a separate presentation by the Department of Water Resources, the task force saw lots of ideas to improve levees and water conveyance. But there was little offered that would boost natural river runoff through the Delta and out to sea.

The shortage of such flows -- due to reservoir operations and robust export pumping -- is one factor in the decline of native fish and the rise of invasive species.

"I'm just asking the state to make a commitment to estuary health that is comparable to the other values," McPeak said.

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