

A thirst for some solutions

North-South water issues require genuine cooperation

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* NOTE: Last in a series

It's time for the FED half of CALFED to flex its muscles in protecting the San Joaquin Delta and thereby the water supply and water quality of California.

Otherwise, the CALFED Bay-Delta Program might as well close up shop in 2004.

The latest threat to the state-federal collaboration -- which is aimed at resolving decades of infighting -- is the so-called Napa Plan, crafted in July by some Delta water exporters, state officials and Los Angeles-area consumer agencies.

Missing from the closed-door meeting were CALFED representatives and other Delta interests who might have opposed a suggestion that the amount of water being pumped south be increased to 326 billion gallons a year.

State Sen. Michael Machado, D-Linden, then proposed legislation that would halt the plan until steps are taken to improve water quality, ecosystems and levees.

It's a stopgap measure sure to draw opposition from Southern California lawmakers, who will be lobbied long and hard to open the floodgates. The state is adding 550,000 new residents every year -- roughly the equivalent of Vermont -- and most of them are moving to the Los Angeles area.

The volume of Colorado River water has been limited, so agencies such as the huge Metropolitan Water District are casting about for new sources.

This latest showdown over the Delta's future make it obvious California's longstanding water wars aren't over. Powerful forces are at work to marginalize and circumvent CALFED.

The California Department of Water Resources and the federal Bureau of Reclamation, each part of the Napa Plan discussions, have been unwilling to step in.

The Napa Plan has left area anglers, environmentalists, municipalities, conservationists and farmers upset.

Rep. Richard Pombo, R-Tracy, now chairman of the House Resources Committee, might be the one who gets CALFED back on track.

"CALFED will get reauthorized this year," Pombo said. "Water and CALFED and Napa are among my top priorities."

Pombo says the answer lies in merging the objectives of CALFED and the Napa Plan.

The six-term congressman has more power in Washington, D.C., and some new proclivities. If he is able to pull even a portion of the state's divergent water interests together, it will be a positive sign.

Like Machado, he'll be contending with Southern California water interests Manteca farmer Alex Hildebrand calls "big gorilla" and "water buffaloes."

It's not the only critical issue looming in 2004.

Work has started on the \$150 million, 40-mile South San Joaquin Irrigation District pipeline from Woodward Reservoir to four cities: Escalon, Manteca, Lathrop and Tracy.

The Farmington groundwater-recharge program, a \$35 million effort to halt saltwater intrusion, also is under way. Stockton East Water District and the Army Corps of Engineers are collaborating on the plan, which is designed to replenish supplies by saturating fields and letting the water sink in.

Stockton's water and wastewater treatment plant will be in flux all year as the city considers its strategy following a court order invalidating privatization efforts.

Despite some vocal opposition, the City Council voted Tuesday to spend \$434,000 to have consultants analyze the environmental impact of privatization. The council also has authorized its attorneys to appeal the court order.

While the city also is working toward sharing some of the Woodward Reservoir supply, San Joaquin County is moving ahead with a program to capture surplus water from the Mokelumne River.

Meanwhile, there's hope the San Joaquin River finally will experience a reversal of fortunes during 2004. Since the 1940s, California's second-longest river has been plagued by competing demands.

Friant Dam diversions rob the river of 98 percent of its headwaters, all but ruining it by the time it reaches Stockton. New alarm over saltwater intrusion will be a major issue.

Even with these other issues, CALFED can and should play a role.

The issues of water in California have always been geographic, not political.

Pombo and Machado could wind up being allies in the crucial struggle to protect the Delta.

If water quality slips and the ecosystem collapses because of a multibillion-gallon transfer, all Californians, even those south of the Delta, lose.

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