



7. WATER: Report urges fresh thinking to solve Calif. delta problems

Arthur O'Donnell, *Land Letter* editor

A fundamental change is needed in thinking about policies to restore the ecological health and preserve the economic vitality of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta region, a California think-tank declared this week. Instead of trying to forge incremental, consensus-based solutions to what have proven to be intractable problems, the state should consider giving up on its long-held belief that the delta should be managed as a freshwater resource devoted to agriculture and drinking water exports to Southern California.

Instead, said the report by the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC), a delta that is heterogeneous and variable across space and time is more likely to support native species and new economic activities. "Accepting the vision of a variable delta, as opposed to the commonly held vision of a static delta, will allow for more sustainable and innovative management, the PPIC report says.

Or, in the words of one of the report's co-authors Ellen Hanek, "The delta cannot be all things to all people."

The region, which represents the confluence of two major rivers and waters from San Francisco Bay, is considered an economic linchpin for the state, providing fresh water for 25 million residents and farms throughout the state via the California aqueduct.

The PPIC report comes at a time when California's Resources Agency and Department of Water Resources are just beginning a "Delta Vision" process that would establish policies to govern the resource for decades to come ([*Land Letter*](#), Nov. 30, 2006).



California's troubled Bay-Delta region needs fresh thinking to resolve its many problems, a new report says. Photo courtesy of California Department of Water Resources.

Among currently sacrosanct policies is the preservation of agricultural water supplies from the delta at all costs. Another commonly held idea is that more infrastructure, in the form of peripheral canals and export pipelines, or barriers to prevent salt water incursions into the delta estuary, will be effective in the face of potential catastrophic changes -- whether brought by earthquakes or climate change. "The current management of the delta is unsustainable for almost all stakeholders," the report finds. "The combined effects of continued land subsidence, sea level rise, increasing seismic risk, and worsening winter floods make continued reliance on weak delta levees imprudent and unworkable over the long term."

"Under its current configuration, the delta is not very reliable for anybody," explained colleague Jay Lund, an engineering professor at the University of California in Davis who also co-wrote the study, which is called "Envisioning Futures for the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta."

While reviewing many of the serious problems faced by the state in trying to manage this vital resource, the study concentrates on exploring nine alternatives that range in extremes from trying to maintain a freshwater delta, or creating a "Fortress Delta" with expensive seawalls and floodgates, to abandoning reliance on it completely.

The report rejects those extremes, instead calling for further exploration of flexible approaches that allow different sections of the region to specialize in particular functions, allowing some areas to return to a fluctuating-salinity ecosystem, or even the concept of allowing urbanization of some Delta lands while reducing agricultural production.

None of those changes would come easily or cheaply, the report recognizes, so a commitment to making difficult political choices and willingness to compensate those adversely affected by the decisions must be a part of the new vision.

Confluence of visions

Although the report is somewhat critical of the state's current "Delta Vision" quest for lacking a strong technical base for decision making, state officials found the study to be generally supportive of the effort.

"The PPIC report is a helpful, innovative resource document in the complex but necessary struggle to revitalize the delta for the 21st century," said DWR director Lester Snow. "This study can help focus stakeholders and policymakers on realistic strategies to renew this vital, but troubled estuary."

Resources Agency Secretary Mike Chrisman noted that the PPIC report provides new ideas that can be incorporated into the work of a new blue-ribbon advisory group named this week by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger (R). "There's no question that much of what is identified by this study will help guide us in this process," he said.

Alf Brandt, legislative adviser with the state Assembly's Water, Parks and Natural Resources Committee, told *Land Letter* that the PPIC report make two important advances in thinking. "It analyzes topics that were previously taboo, such as possible decreases to agricultural production," he said, "and it asks how to address statewide needs" without necessarily trying to accommodate every embedded interest.

Water issues are shaping up to be a major topic in the Legislature this session, with more than a dozen bills already introduced that attempt to cover everything from flood planning to construction of storage or conveyance facilities. Among the major legislative vehicles on the table are S.B. 59, which would set the stage for a \$3.95 billion bond issue in 2008 for storage improvements that would affect delta flows, and S.B. 34, which would allow DWR to recoup the cost of \$4.1 billion in water bonds approved by voters last November through fees on water users.

Santa Clara's state Sen. Joe Simitian (D) has offered S.B. 27, meant to promote construction of a controversial peripheral canal to carry increased export capacity around the delta. Simitian also has proposed S.C.A. 2, a constitutional amendment that must be approved by voters to change existing statutes to ease construction and financing of the canal.

With three weeks to go before the deadline for introducing bills in Sacramento, much of what has been proposed is sketchy and awaiting details. Capitol observers think that many of the legislative ideas will come together in a bigger package that brings together the issues of flooding and reservoirs -- such as the proposals from Schwarzenegger to build a new dam on the San Joaquin River and a new surface storage reservoir west of Sacramento ([Land Letter](#), Jan. 11).

Given that the "Delta Vision" process is under way, there may not be a major bill to address delta issues this year. However, the Assembly's water committee is expecting to hold informational hearings on the delta in mid-March.

Environmental groups press for delta smelt protections

The "Delta Vision" and related scientific studies of the delta are moving on a slower course than desired by several environmental groups concerned about the prospects for the threatened delta smelt. Once one of the most abundant of freshwater fish in the delta, the smelt population has plummeted by about 97 percent since 1993, a victim of poor water quality and the pumps used to expedite water exports to the south.

This week several groups petitioned the California Fish and Game Commission to elevate the smelt's status to endangered under the state's Endangered Species Act.

"Delta smelt are on a rapid trajectory toward extinction and clearly need more state and federal protection," said Jeff Miller of the Center for Biological Diversity in San Francisco. "The recent collapse of the estuary's major fish populations is dramatic evidence that government agencies have utterly failed to address the decline of the Bay-Delta ecosystem. They cannot continue to approve record levels of water diversion at a time when the entire delta ecosystem is in crisis."

"The science is even clearer and more compelling than it was a year ago," added Tina Swanson, senior scientist with the Bay Institute. "Delta smelt, one of the best indicators of environmental conditions in California's most important estuary, are in critical condition due to reduced freshwater inflows, record-high water diversions, and harmful non-native species that thrive in the degraded delta habitat," she said. "It's time for the state and federal resource agencies to apply this information to protect this species and its habitat before it's too late." Joining CDB and the Bay Institute on the petition was the Natural Resources Defense Council.

Curtailling water exports is clearly one objective of the groups' petition for emergency protections for the smelt. "New scientific analysis show that recent record-high delta water exports are related to the delta smelt decline," the groups said in a release. "Incredibly, state and federal agencies recently proposed increased water diversion and storage projects that would have exacerbated conditions for the delta smelt."