

Local Commentary • Water

# A sense of urgency, equality to address Delta goals

Part 1 of 2

It's a welcome sense of urgency for a state waking up to a water supply nightmare: Legislators in Sacramento are aggressively tackling a raft of bills aimed at solving the crisis in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

There are just days left in the legislative session, and time is fast running out for our representatives to get anything significant accomplished this year.

Legislators from both major political parties and both houses of our state Legislature have pledged to make water a top priority in these final days of the session as they try to hammer out legislation that not only addresses the water supply and ecosystem problems in the Delta, but also figures out how to pay for the solutions at a time when California is more fiscally strapped than ever.

At the Castaic Lake Water Agency, we are applauding the effort — cautiously.

CLWA has joined the Association of California Water Agencies and other water associations and agencies in urging legislators to keep several key principles in mind as they try to craft what may be a package of Delta legislation to be considered by the state Senate and Assembly within the next week.

First and foremost, we believe any Delta solution must recognize

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ecosystem restoration and water supply reliability as co-equal goals.

This recognition that both priorities warrant equal consideration is so important that we are calling on our state's elected leaders to codify the equal importance of these two goals in the legislation itself.

Some might think the goals of restoring the Delta ecosystem and ensuring a reliable supply of water from the Delta would be at odds with each other. However, we believe the exact opposite is true.

As it stands now, the Delta's future is unsustainable, either for the sake of the ecosystem or the water supply.

"Without a reliable water supply that supports and sustains a recovering economy, there is no capacity to invest in the environment," notes a joint Aug. 17 letter to key legislators from a group of major California water associations and agencies, including CLWA. "And without a robust and sustainable Delta environment there won't be reliable water supply."

California can't afford to solve one problem or the other. It must solve both.

To give one goal short shrift is to sabotage the other. The crisis has been building for years, but it's now immediate. And it's not

an exaggeration to say the consequences of failure are catastrophic, with unacceptably high human, economic and environmental costs.

Over the past couple of years, California has endured the impacts of federal court decisions that fail to recognize the co-equal nature of these two issues.

As the courts have ordered pumping from the Delta to be reduced in order to protect the Delta smelt, salmon and other fish species, they have worsened the already significant water supply impacts of a three-year drought for the 25 million residents, businesses and farms whose water supplies depend on the Delta.

This, coupled with aging and seismically vulnerable Delta infrastructure, has rendered these issues more urgent than ever.

That's why we at CLWA have endorsed the Bay Delta Conservation Plan. We believe any legislative attempt to resolve the crisis must recognize the Bay Delta Conservation Plan and facilitate it — rather than hinder it — as a key tool to addressing the technical issues in resolving the Delta crisis.

*On Thursday: More on the Bay Delta Conservation Plan and its effects.*

*R.J. Kelly is president of the Castaic Lake Water Agency Board of Directors. His column reflects the agency's views, not necessarily those of The Signal.*

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The Bay Delta Conservation Plan — endorsed by the Castaic Lake Water Agency as a key tool to addressing the technical issues in resolving the Delta crisis — follows a nationally recognized habitat conservation planning process advocated by state and federal endangered species laws.

The plan is being developed by a diverse collection of water agencies, biologists, environmentalists, engineers and policy experts.

Those involved are committed to the equal goals of creating a more reliable water system and helping fish species recover in the Delta.

The Bay Delta Conservation Plan effort is collaborative, public and science-based. The issues are difficult and often controversial.

Perspectives around the table vary widely, leading to candid and lively debate. Out of this transparent process, common ground and real solutions — so elusive in the past — are emerging.

The plan will create a permitting process to enable water providers to design a new delivery system that will help protect fish species.

Its process goes far beyond bare-bones compliance with individual endangered species laws; it aids the recovery of numerous species at once and the restoration of thousands of acres of habitat.

California's state and federal water delivery systems were built a half-century ago and no longer meet modern economic and environmental needs.

A critical element of the Bay Delta Conservation Plan involves the study of a possible new canal or other structure to separate the conveyance of freshwater deliveries from the nat-

ural flows in the Delta during periods critical to the fisheries.

This would involve a delicate balancing act of diverting water out of the Sacramento River when rain and Sierra snowmelt are plentiful without causing harm to water quality and fish.

The situation is different than it was a quarter-century ago, the last time California considered a canal.

The Bay Delta Conservation Plan represents a far more comprehensive plan that would help protect fish, and a new conveyance facility would be paid for by public water agencies, not the state general fund.

And a possible canal is only one component of the Bay Delta Conservation Plan, which includes a long list of measures to enhance the Delta ecosystem, some of which would be appropriately funded through public sources.

Lastly, as legislators roll up their sleeves to craft a package of water bills, we ask that they also:

■ Bear in mind the need for a balanced approach to funding, including a public financing component to complement the investments that will be made by California water agencies.

Reading between the lines: It's likely California will need to seek voters' approval of a funding mechanism to cover part of the expense of an overall Delta solution, which may include new water storage facilities and other infrastructure improvements in addition to a conveyance facility.

■ Avoid letting broader statewide issues unduly divert the focus from finding a Delta solution. Issues like

conservation, groundwater management and water rights are all important, too, but the Delta issue's urgency is unrivaled.

■ Ensure that any new bodies or review boards created to oversee the Delta solution are not duplicative of existing authorities, and that they are designed to promote pursuit of the co-equal goals of ecosystem restoration and water supply reliability.

As you absorb all of this information, you might ask, "What can I do?"

Every voice matters. You can visit the Southern California Water Committee's Web site, [www.socalwater.org](http://www.socalwater.org), and click on the link "Delta Call to Action."

There you will find the water committee's Delta policy position, which has been endorsed by Castaic Lake Water Agency and many other agencies.

If you would like to add your name as a supporter, or if your business or organization would like to do so, you can download forms to return to the water committee and join us in advocating a sustainable solution for the Delta.

We're glad to see the sense of urgency in Sacramento is real — there seems to be recognition among legislators that this is not an issue to be dealt with some time in the future, but now.

Hopefully, with this sense of urgency, our leaders will remember that a sustainable Delta ecosystem and a reliable water supply are equal in importance, and in fact each of the two goals is dependent upon the other.

Our state's future depends on it. *R.J. Kelly is president of the Castaic Lake Water Agency Board of Directors. His column reflects the agency's views and not necessarily those of The Signal.*