

# Striking a balance in solving Delta water crisis

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Courtesy photo

**The Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta is a wildlife habitat and a major source of water for 25 million Californians and more than 1,000,000 acres of farm land.**

In all the debate over what should be done to resolve the crisis in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, it's important the end result is an ecosystem solution that protects a variety of species — including people.

A great deal of energy and political capital have been expended in the effort to protect wildlife like the Delta smelt, a small fish unique to the Delta that typically only lives through one annual spawning season.

Not to belittle the importance of the 3-inch fish; we should, of course, always consider the impacts of human activity on wildlife.

However, at the same time as reductions in pumping of water from the Delta have been ordered to protect the smelt and other fish species, those reductions coupled with an ongoing drought have had significant impacts on the state's human residents.

That's why the Castaic Lake Water Agency and other State Water Project contractors are providing financial and technical support to the California Department of Water Resources' Delta Habitat Conservation and Conveyance Plan process, which aims to not only restore wildlife habitat in and around the



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SCV Voices

Delta, but also to ensure and protect a valuable source of fresh water for people.

The timing of this effort is crucial. What happens now and over

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the next couple of years will have lasting impacts on the future of California, for wildlife and human beings alike.

The Delta is a vital location; it's an estuary and river delta where the Sacramento and San Joaquin

rivers meet and connect to the San Francisco Bay. It's not only a wildlife habitat, but also a major source of water for 25 million Californians and more than a million acres of farm land in the San Joaquin Valley.

Thanks to timely water supply acquisitions by Castaic Lake Water, we here in the Santa Clarita Valley have had the good fortune to avoid extreme measures like mandatory reductions in water use as we cope with the drought and the Delta water pumping restrictions that have been imposed over the past two years to protect smelt, salmon and other fish species.

Nonetheless, we are strongly advocating an ongoing ethic of smart water use and conservation, as it's important to use the resources efficiently even in wet years.

But elsewhere in the state, the direct impacts of the drought and the regulatory decisions are serious, real and immediate.

According to the Association of California Water Agencies, some 49 agencies throughout the state have been forced to resort to mandatory reductions in water use, affecting the quality of life for millions of

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California. For some, the impacts go well beyond minor inconveniences and forced conservation.

Farmers tell stories of drought-stricken wells going dry and "sucking air." Farm workers in agricultural communities are out of work as land is fallowed.

In Mendota, a rural town west of Fresno that has become a sort of "poster city" for the drought, The Associated Press reports the unemployment rate is hovering at a staggering 40 percent.

And the University of California, Davis, has reported that as of May, water shortages in the San Joaquin Valley have cost an estimated 35,000 jobs and \$830 million in farm revenue.

The economic impacts trickle down — or, perhaps, up — from there, as everything including property values, state services,

employment (directly and indirectly tied to food supply) and prices at the grocery store can be impacted by a lack of water.

For courts and regulatory agencies to ignore the very real human impacts of this crisis and focus primarily on the health of fish is unbalanced and unsustainable.

In addition to the much-publicized series of U.S. District Court rulings over the past two years that are designed to protect the Delta smelt by ordering reductions in water pumping, state water providers also face additional cutbacks ordered by the National Marine Fisheries Service.

Last month a biological opinion aimed at protecting Chinook salmon, steelhead and green sturgeon called for water deliveries to be cut by an additional 10 percent — on top of those cuts already ordered — to protect the smelt.

Fortunately, there is a path where long-term solutions can be worked out.

The Delta Habitat Conservation and Conveyance Plan is a plan-

ning an environmental permitting process to restore habitat for Delta fisheries in a way that reliably delivers water supplies to 25 million Californians.

With the support of a wide variety of agencies — including Castaic Lake Water, which has contributed technical support, and funding for the process — a joint state-federal environmental impact report/environmental impact statement is being prepared to analyze the impacts of the options for the Delta.

These activities are challenging. The Delta faces pollution, rising sea levels due to climate change, impacts from non-native species that don't necessarily coexist well with the native ones, and the drought itself.

Further, many of the water delivery and storage systems in use throughout California were designed decades ago, when the population was much smaller. In addition, aging levees in the Delta are not considered to be up to the task of withstanding a major earth-

quake.

The Delta Habitat Conservation and Conveyance Plan process is scientifically comparing a variety of solutions, including proposals to build a peripheral canal that would route fresh water from the Sacramento River around the Delta and reduce the impacts of the State Water Project and Central Valley Project pumps on the Delta's fish.

It would also improve the quality of water and benefit our region by reducing the levels of chloride in our imported water supplies.

Twenty-seven years ago the state's voters defeated a proposal to build a similar peripheral canal, along with a number of other water infrastructure projects, in part because of the projected costs.

In hindsight, those investments may well have helped California avoid the current environmental and water supply crisis.

What exactly is the solution? We believe the elements of the solution have already been identified.

However, it's too soon to say ex-

actly what form the solution will take because the ideal combination of those elements will be identified through the Delta Habitat Conservation and Conveyance Plan process.

As such, the DHCCP process provides the best chance at arriving at that solution — one that will work for the wildlife, protecting ecosystems and sensitive habitats, and will work for the humans, too, finding an environmentally responsible way to ensure that the water from the Delta region continues to be available as a precious resource to Californians for many years to come.

We need to strike an equitable balance between environmental impacts and human impacts as we decide how best to manage the Delta's resources — and the DHCCP process seeks to do just that. It's our best hope.

*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.*