

Bakersfield Californian

Editorial: California's water system on brink of disaster; "The Delta levee system is fragile, many of its native species are declining and it lacks strong governing institutions." -- PPIC study, 'Envisioning Futures' February 17, 2007

Californians cannot afford to blow what may be our best and perhaps last chance to develop a rational water policy in California before disaster strikes.

An exhaustive study by the private Public Policy Institute of California irrefutably demonstrates that changes must be made now in how water flows from where it occurs naturally in Northern California to where it is needed in the Central Valley and Southern California.

The political, environmental and geographic bottleneck is the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta -- the modern battleground in the state's notorious water wars.

The Delta is a 1,600-square-mile estuary fed by the confluence of the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers, and open to San Francisco Bay on the west. Water flowing through it from the north feeds the California Aqueduct at Tracy for shipment southward.

An intricate set of levees impounds the Delta's marshy water to keep it from flooding surrounding land and small islands.

For years, urban and agricultural interests have sought ways to increase the amount and quality of water they import through the Delta. The need is great -- 23 million people and 5 million acres of farmland depend on the water, and demand is increasing.

In 1968, a proposed canal to take Northern California water around the Delta -- rather than through it -- to the California Aqueduct triggered bitter political divisions.

To this day, mention of a canal or "conveyance" or "through-Delta facility" triggers political gridlock.

The critical finding in the PPIC study is that geographic, environmental and population conditions have changed so much in the past 25 years that the entire system teeters on the brink of disaster.

In only one of many possible disasters for example, in an earthquake that causes major levee failures the five-year accumulated cost to the state's economy could be \$40 billion, and drinking water for two-thirds of the state could be imperiled for months.

As complex as the problem is, the study's most vital point is that all of the now-warring stakeholders can benefit if they join in developing a new way of operating.

PPIC has proposed nine alternatives to the Delta's operation, management and facilities, ranging from doing nothing to a full-fledged reprise of the Peripheral Canal.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has formed a task force to analyze the PPIC data and recommend the best policy to pursue.

Although the study makes clear that everyone can benefit to some degree from changing the system, it is not without some cost:

"Going forward, Californians will need to recognize that the Delta cannot be all things to all people. Tradeoffs are inevitable."

That said, it is vital that the governor's task force and all groups that testify before it -- and their constituent members -- recognize that parochial interests cannot bring peace in the water wars.