

Chico Enterprise-Record
Editorial: Bold changes needed in delta
February 20, 2007

Back in 1982, voters rejected a proposal to build a canal around the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta to ease the movement of north state water to the south.

The peripheral canal idea has resurfaced a couple of times since, most recently in a report by the Public Policy Institute of California that was released earlier this month.

And upon looking at the report's supporting data on the state of the delta, the canal idea shouldn't be rejected out of hand.

The institute paints a grim picture of the delta and states flatly the current situation simply cannot be maintained.

Much of the area is more than 15 feet below sea level, kept dry just by high, aging levees -- 1,100 miles of levees all told.

Native fish populations are plummeting, most likely because man has changed what used to be an ecosystem that fluctuated between brackish and freshwater with the tides and the seasons into an exclusively freshwater area.

We as a state are relying on this mess as the water supply for 23 million people and thousands of Central California farms.

That could all change in the event of an earthquake or other natural disaster that breached a number of levees. The collapse would draw enough saltwater into the delta that the pumps at Tracy that pull water south would have to be shut down.

The economic losses of that are estimated at \$40 billion.

The institute came up with a few other ideas, like "armoring" a number of channels across the eastern delta and building some tidal gates to provide a more secure route for the freshwater flow.

But the most important point the institute made is that the status quo will not survive. Nature has the trump card, and it could be played at any time, whether we're ready or not. A peripheral canal might be the fix, or some other option might be the fix, but there has to be a fix.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger recently appointed a task force to come up with a delta management plan by the end of the year. The group includes political, environmental and scientific leaders.

It's essential they come up with a bold plan that secures the water delivery system and revives the delta ecosystem. And it's essential that we make it happen, even if it isn't politically palatable to us all.