

Fremont Argus

Editorial: It's time to reconsider peripheral canal

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ONCE the answer to many of California's water worries, the problem-plagued Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta now faces so many question marks itself that Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger advocates building new reservoirs and some variation on the old peripheral canal idea to ensure adequate future water supplies.

"We need to build more storage and we have to build conveyance, the canal, all of those kinds of things, even though it's politically risky again," Schwarzenegger said during a recent speech.

Acknowledging that it's "one of those big, big issues that has been swept under the rug for decades," he said, "We have studied this subject to death. It's time for action."

The canal idea has been resurrected because of the multitude of woes the Delta now faces. We're all familiar with how pumps that route water south for residents and farmers are chewing up Delta smelt, Chinook salmon and other species. But the waterway has a multitude of other problems, including contamination, the effects of global warming, intrusive salt water, alien species and fragile levees that need to be replaced and fortified to keep water from reclaiming fields and homes built below water levels.

Constructing a canal that would route Sierra runoff water around the Delta is an idea Californians rejected in 1982. The idea was to build a 43-mile canal and pump water directly from the Sacramento River to the reservoir from which it is sent south for irrigation and consumption. Most resistance came from Northern Californians who perceived it as a "water grab" by the south.

Similar criticism is surfacing now. Farmers also fear that routing H₂O around the Delta will leave them with salty, unusable water.

The time is right to at least think about a canal and other ways to transport water and protect the Delta. Appellate court Judge Ronald Robie, a former director of the Department of Water Resources, says "over the last 25 years ... the Delta has gotten worse and worse."

Robert Twiss, an environmental planning professor at UC-Berkeley, says, "There is growing recognition that the present layout of the levees and delivering fresh water out of the Delta is something we can't maintain long term."

Given the many issues the Delta faces, relying on it for two-thirds of the state's water supply is risky. So much so that the Public Policy Institute of California has identified a canal as one of five strategies the state should contemplate. And, State Sen. Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto, has authored a bill that would require the state to consider a new management course for the Delta by January.

Critics who fear the state could abandon the Delta if a canal is built prefer that the state invest in levees, send less water south and better manage the water system.

California needs a well-thought-out plan to address water distribution problems. Most reasonable suggestions need to be considered, including the storage of water in depleted aquifers. Levees must be rebuilt, more effort put into managing and maintaining the Delta, and new ways found to store and move water as demand increases.

As H₂MDULO becomes even more precious, we'd also like to see Southern California invest more on storage, retrieval and desalination projects. Desalination eventually may need to be considered for our part of the state as well.

Given the scope of the problems, building a canal to expedite water south must be kept on the table. To dismiss it outright would be foolish and shortsighted.