

***Los Angeles Times***

**Opinion Editorial: "Preserving the imperiled California Delta. The fragile Northern California ecosystem from which L.A. gets much of its water can't wait very long for a plan to fix it."**

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DELTA AND DAWN, the wayward humpback whales stranded near Rio Vista, have taught thousands about the location of the California Delta, where the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers meet and flow toward San Francisco Bay. It's about time: An estimated 23 million of us receive some or most of our water from the delta.

And the delta is in trouble. Has been for at least 30 years. But this year, the juvenile population of the endangered delta smelt — an "indicator" species — dropped by 93%, a plunge toward extinction that could signal imminent disaster. Arresting that disaster could require a cut in water delivered to you and me.

The delta is a 700-square-mile maze of river channels, sloughs, marshes and mostly artificial islands protected by a tenuous levee system. Two giant water-delivery systems — the State Water Project and the federal Central Valley Project — draw their water from the delta and send it southward in canals to the farms of the San Joaquin Valley and homes and businesses in Southern California.

The problem is that extensive pumping over the last half a century has disrupted the environment of the delta. Fish sometimes end up in the machinery, and the pumping is so strong that it sometimes reverses the natural river-to-delta-to-bay water flow. Temperature, depth and salinity are affected. On top of that, increased irrigation using pumped delta water means increased irrigation runoff, which has reduced the overall quality of delta water.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's Delta Vision task force recognizes the problem, and it is supposed to produce a comprehensive solution to a host of delta problems by the end of 2008. Good luck.

Efforts to address the situation go back to the 1960s and the original State Water Project, which was supposed to deliver 4.2 million acre-feet of water a year to Kern County farms and urban Southern California (one acre-foot meets the needs of two families for a year). But the project was only half-built, and it delivers only half the water that was promised. The biggest missing piece is the "peripheral canal," meant to bypass the delta and deliver Sacramento River water directly to the pumps and the aqueduct, while still injecting enough fresh water downstream to maintain the ecosystem.

In 1982, however, California voters voted down the peripheral canal because northerners feared a Southern California water grab. So the delta struggled along for another 20 years as the demand for water increased.

Next came Cal-Fed, a consortium of state and federal agencies and a score of "stakeholders" (environmental groups, commercial fishermen, urban water users, irrigators, etc.) that attempted to negotiate an end to the state water wars. The process had a warm and fuzzy feel, and in 2001, we got a multiyear, \$13-billion plan for more infrastructure, to be paid for by state and federal funds.

Turns out, however, that consensus works best when it comes to "protecting the environment" and "serving the needs of people." This one fell apart over details like where to spend the money first and who would pay which bill. Each stakeholder wanted to come out ahead, but there's not enough water left in California for "win-win" solutions. It didn't help that the federal government

never came up with its share of the cash.

The delta doesn't have another 30 years for more warm and fuzzy negotiations. The state — beginning with Schwarzenegger's task force — must make tough decisions now.

Once and for all, it has to build a canal or another conveyance to send Sacramento River water to the aqueduct without destroying the delta. This time, the design must allay northern fears of a water grab. And, like new reservoirs, dams and levees (which the system also needs), the project should be paid for by those who will benefit from it. That means irrigation districts and urban water districts must raise money and pass the costs to their customers.

The state should immediately buy up thousands of acres of irrigated farmland on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley and give it a rest. That land is laden with poisonous selenium; the more it's irrigated (with delta water), the more the tainted runoff pollutes the environment.

And finally, California needs a tough water czar — a real enforcer with the authority to implement a broad plan and let the experts work out the details. The Times once proposed Bruce Babbitt, who worked water wonders as governor of Arizona and secretary of the Interior — and bent arms during the Cal-Fed negotiations — as the ideal candidate. Assuming he's available, it's still a good idea.