

North County Times
Editorial: State fishing for trouble in Delta
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Our view: California must act to ensure that fragile fish species doesn't swim away with our water

The recent decision to shut down the pumps that transfer water from Northern to Southern California to protect an endangered fish was, forgive the pun, a watershed event. For only the second time (the first being in 1994), the Southland's residents were put on notice that, under certain circumstances, the well-being of a fish could have precedence over their water needs.

Clearly, this won't do. We can't abide cutting off half the state from its water supply, even temporarily. We need to start exploring options that will allow us to avoid a future choice between fish and people.

Experts believe that the health of the Delta smelt, a minnowlike fish with a one-year life span, is a prime indicator of the overall health of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, the largest estuary on the West Coast. If they're right, then the Delta is in trouble. And if the Delta is in trouble, so is San Diego County, as we rely on the Delta for 60 percent of our water.

In 1996, California Department of Fish and Game surveys counted more than 3,000 smelt. This year, they counted only 30. It is this dramatic drop in surveyed smelt, which seems to have started in 2000, that prompted the Department of Water Resources late last month to temporarily turn off the pumps that, while acting as a giant spigot for Southern California, also kill endangered smelt.

Biologists don't yet know exactly why the smelt population is plummeting, but the pumps are only one suspect. Others include toxins and invasive species that may have robbed the smelt of the food it needs to survive.

Great pains are being taken to protect the fish. The pumps have screens, and Department of Water Resources employees scoop up smelt and haul them by truck back to the Delta waters. But some fish still die in the process. With the numbers of smelt so low this year, turning off the pumps was the easiest, most immediate action that state officials could take to protect the few remaining smelt in the Delta.

We wish we could report a quick fix on the horizon, but it's not to be. Gov. Schwarzenegger tasked a blue ribbon commission with delivering a comprehensive plan for saving the Delta, but its recommendations are not expected for several months. State officials are looking for other ways to move the water around, but no specific plan has been adopted.

One idea that is making a comeback is the long-discussed Peripheral Canal. First proposed in the 1940s, the 40-mile canal would bypass the Delta to take water directly from the Sacramento River to the California Aqueduct. With an estimated price tag that could reach \$10 billion, if built it would be one of the most expensive public works projects ever.

The idea of a peripheral canal was approved by the Legislature, but voters, fueled by regional animosities and environmental fears, rejected it in 1982.

A lot has changed since 1982. Southern California has added 12 million residents and ---- if the fate of the smelt is any indication ---- not building the canal has been no guarantee of environmental health for the Delta.

Also, as the success of last year's bond initiatives show, Californians seem to be in the mood to finance large infrastructure projects. Although legally forbidden from tapping into the \$5.4 billion in

water-bond money we approved in November 2006, the governor and legislators should definitely think again about the second canal.

Drought and the state's declining share of Colorado River water make the Delta a more important source of our water than ever before. Several lawsuits also threaten to make future stoppages more likely. Our water future, and that of the smelt, depends on finding a solution to this problem.