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Editorial: Delta Danger
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California can no longer afford to ignore the endangered Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. The state needs to find a new way to manage the West Coast's largest estuary, or reconcile itself to water shortages, environmental catastrophe and destructive flooding.

So legislation that seeks to find a solution to the delta's peril is timely and necessary. SB 27 sets a 2008 deadline for legislative action to fix the delta, and focuses on approaches outlined in a February report by the Public Policy Institute of California. The bill builds on Gov. Schwarzenegger's appointment in February of a blue ribbon panel to report on potential solutions by Jan. 1, 2008. A coalition of state senators led by Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto, proposed the legislation, which had its first Senate hearing last week.

The entire state has a stake in the delta's fate. The 738,000-acre delta supplies 23 million Californians with water, including much of Southern California, and irrigates 45 percent of the fruits and vegetables produced in the United States.

Delta solutions will be neither easy nor cheap, and require painful political choices. But the state has little choice if it hopes to avert disaster.

The 1,100 miles of levees that protect the delta are aging and at risk of failure, endangering people, property and water systems.

The delta's habitat and wildlife face threats from invasive species, pollution and pumping that sends water elsewhere. The pollution and rising salt water levels threaten the quality of water that serves two-thirds of the state.

The approaches in the Public Policy Institute report include channeling water supplies around the delta -- shades of the Peripheral Canal voters rejected 25 years ago. Other ideas would reduce water exports from the delta. The report's estimates peg the cost of these plans at initial investments of \$1 billion to \$3 billion and annual price tags of about \$30 million a year to more than \$500 million.

The governor and Legislature cannot let this effort repeat the patterns of previous failures to fix the delta. For example, the state-federal CalFed Bay Delta Program has labored for more than a decade, at a cost of \$3 billion, without resolving the matter.

Delta issues are a complex tangle of conflicting interests. But delay in finding a solution is irresponsible and dangerous, and the consequences of failure unacceptable.