

Sacramento Bee
“Canal still best Delta water fix”
Dan Walters
April 1, 2007

Jerry Brown's eight-year governorship was an eclectic, often inconsistent mélange of pronouncements and actions, some of which were far-seeing -- alternative energy, for instance -- and some short-sighted and injurious, such as misreading population growth trends and virtually shutting down highway construction as unneeded.

One of Brown's better initiatives was closing a gap in the water system that had been started under his father, Pat Brown, and is the chief source of water for two-thirds of Californians. Water is captured by a dam on the Feather River at Oroville and carried to the San Joaquin Valley and Southern California via the California Aqueduct, fed by pumps at the south end of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta near Tracy.

Pumping water out of the Delta, the younger Brown recognized, was injurious to the huge estuary's marine life by interfering with and even reversing natural flows. Therefore, he and his water director, Ron Robie, wanted to isolate the delicate ecosystem from the water transfer system by building a 44-mile-long, sloughlike channel to carry water around the Delta to the aqueduct.

Initially, the "Peripheral Canal" enjoyed support from both environmentalists and municipal and agricultural water agencies, but by the time the young governor had squeezed it through the Legislature, the comity had evaporated.

Southern California water agencies remained supportive, but large farmers turned against it, saying it had too many environmental restrictions that would limit water deliveries. Environmental groups turned sour, saying that the canal would make it too easy to increase water exports from Northern California. Delta landowners also opposed it, aware that building the Peripheral Canal would remove the rationale for state and federal governments to shore up their deteriorating levees.

Although the opponents came at the Peripheral Canal from conflicting standpoints, they joined forces on a referendum. After a highly misleading, farmer-financed campaign, voters rejected the Peripheral Canal in 1982.

Water policy has been largely frozen ever since voters issued that ill-informed decree. Billions of dollars have been squandered on schemes to improve both the Delta and water deliveries, but the ecosystem has continued to deteriorate, with declining runs of major fish species. And late last month, an Alameda County judge, acting at the behest of sport-fishing advocates, ordered the state to turn off its pumps unless it devises a way to protect fish from being sucked into their blades or obtains a permit to kill them.

Had the Peripheral Canal been built as Jerry Brown urged, the fish being chewed up in the pumps would have been alive and more numerous. Had the Peripheral Canal been built, we wouldn't have to worry so much about Delta levees collapsing due to an earthquake or being breached by rising ocean levels from global warming, either of which would threaten water deliveries. But the canal wasn't built.

Arnold Schwarzenegger is the first governor since Brown to truly confront the water policy gridlock. While he hasn't declared support for the Peripheral Canal, his Department of Water Resources has identified it as a potential option.

Schwarzenegger described the fish-kill decision as "one more indication of how our system doesn't really work, and that we have to upgrade it. We have to fix our levees. There are a lot of things that need to be done. We need to have more above-the-ground water storage. We have to start thinking about our Delta; it's very, very vulnerable. As I said, one earthquake and one big storm, and it could wipe out this whole system, and 25 million people will suffer because of it."

He's right.