

Sacramento Bee
“Short-term mentality and water”
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June 3, 2007

There's no inherent -- i.e., rational -- reason why California could not resolve its two-sided water dilemma.

There are, however, a lot of irrational -- i.e., political -- reasons why we have allowed water supply and flood control to languish in the netherworld of unresolved, yet important, public policy issues.

Fundamentally, water policy in all its forms is a very long-range matter, but politics is a very short-range process. The decisions, or non-decisions, on water tend to be driven by immediate, often petty, political factors with consequences that reverberate for decades.

An excellent case in point occurred a few days ago when state and federal water agencies temporarily turned off the pumps that extract water from the southern end of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta to prevent more of the rare Delta smelt from being ground up.

The tiny fish are considered harbingers of the Delta's ecological health and have been vanishing at an alarming rate. It is further proof that we've been messing up the huge estuary, sucking so much water that its natural flows are disrupted and thus lowering the quality of water. But despite the druidic assertions of many self-proclaimed environmentalists that water transfers are the villains, they should look in the mirror.

The problem is not that the State Water Plan -- a complex of dams, reservoirs and canals -- was built, but that it was not completed, thanks to environmental groups and San Joaquin Valley farmers. They persuaded voters in 1982 to reject construction of the Peripheral Canal, which would have transported Sacramento River water around the Delta and allowed the estuary to exist in a more natural, fish-friendly state.

The farmers wanted the canal with fewer environmental safeguards while the enviros were worried that with the plumbing in place, the state would have dammed North Coast rivers -- even though, privately, many environmental leaders acknowledged that the Peripheral Canal would have improved the Delta habitat.

The state's population has grown since 1982 by at least 12 million people, most of whom are dependent on water from the California Aqueduct. Turning off the pumps to save a few smelt does not alter the fact that something like the Peripheral Canal is still needed, along with more water storage to smooth out the peaks and valleys of water supply.

Last winter was a mild one, following a fairly heavy one, which not only demonstrates the need for more water storage, but underscores the ever-present danger of killer flooding along the Sacramento and other Northern California rivers as floodplains are converted into housing for an ever-expanding population.

Better land-use policies and more complete -- i.e., more expensive -- flood protection projects are needed to protect communities along Northern California rivers from Katrina-like flooding, but they've been stalled by opposition from development interests, shortsightedness among local government officials and the general reluctance of everyone to pay for more protection through fees, assessments or taxes.

Last week, however, a Sacramento Bee editorial revealed a Department of Water Resources white paper recommending a tough approach to both land use and flood protection costs that, if adopted by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and the Legislature, would go a long way toward easing the state's flood peril.

It's a big "if" because short-range politics tend to block long-range flood protection policies and Schwarzenegger has been unwilling, at least so far, to provide genuine leadership, bowing to anti-tax and pro-development interests.

Publication of the document, which had been stamped "confidential and privileged," puts the onus on Schwarzenegger to either step up or continue to stall.