

***Sacramento Bee***  
**Editorial: The Delta is sick, and curing it won't be easy**  
**February 11, 2007**

Every now and then, a think tank can rock the real world. The San Francisco-based Public Policy Institute of California may have just done so.

PPIC economist Ellen Hanak and a team of experts from the University of California, Davis, released a remarkable analysis of an old and worsening problem, the state of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. (The PPIC report is available on line via [www.ppic.org](http://www.ppic.org).)

The Delta is a place that most Californians and millions of birds and fish rely on for water. It must simultaneously function as California's biggest water conveyance system and aquatic ecosystem. Failing at either function would have nearly unimaginable consequences.

Yet PPIC warns, convincingly, that the Delta is on a path toward failure. Just as persuasively, it suggests that any real solution yields a Delta that is wildly different than the Delta today.

On a map the Delta appears to be an impossibly complex puzzle of islands. Too few Californians understand this landscape or appreciate how this is the primary water supply that feeds the planet's sixth-largest economy.

The Delta is home to the nation's two largest fresh-water pumping plants (one owned by the federal government, one by the state). There, disaster could strike any number of ways. A flood could breach the levees protecting several key islands, causing salty San Francisco Bay water to rush in and take over the Delta. An earthquake could do the same. Climate change could (or will) make sea levels rise.

Then there are the fish. Nature intended water to flow through the Delta east to west -- from the Sierra to San Francisco Bay. The pumps pull the water north to south.

Nature also intended the Delta to fill with fresh snowmelt in the spring and brackish Bay water come summer and fall. Dams now capture the big snowmelt upstream and release flows to keep the Delta artificially fresh year-round. The fish don't like it.

PPIC has two basic suggestions. First, the natural pattern of fresh and brackish flows must be restored. Second, the effects of the pumping must be isolated from a recovering ecosystem. One approach is a new canal that would move the fresh water for Southern California and San Joaquin Valley agriculture around the Delta. Another approach involves new channels and gates through the Delta. Yet another is to curtail pumping. There is no magic bullet. There are only options, tradeoffs and, inevitably, controversies.

Several government reviews of the Delta are under way. A bill to build the Peripheral Canal is before the California Legislature, but even proponents are waiting for more facts and studies before any big push begins. The environmental community, in general, is holding fire. Contra Costa County and Delta farming interests reject the premise that today's system can't be fixed in a way to protect their interests. If only the Earth were flat, or not warming.

Beware of anything feeling like a timid tinkering with a troubled system. The Delta's problems demand state leaders to go way beyond the comfort zone. At this point, everything uncomfortable should be on the table. PPIC and UC Davis, to their great credit, may have just shaken the water world to its senses.

