

“Disputed canal back on agenda”

Sacramento Bee

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June 19, 2007

A few months after he assumed the governorship in 1999, Gray Davis put forth an oh-so-cautious "preferred alternative" for dealing with the complex problems of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. His incremental steps were aimed, in effect, at delaying major decisions on the troubled estuary until Davis was out of office.

It was characteristic of the risk-averse Davis -- a quality that led to his governorship being terminated three years prematurely by the state's voters and the election of action movie star Arnold Schwarzenegger as his successor.

Ideologically, you couldn't slip a piece of tissue paper between Democrat Davis and Republican Schwarzenegger, but in stylistic terms, the two couldn't be more different. While Davis assiduously avoided conflict whenever he could, Schwarzenegger dives into thorny issues that, as he has said, "have been pushed under the rug for decades."

"I love tackling big problems," Schwarzenegger told a gathering in Chico recently, adding, "I feel strongly that the people of California have sent me to Sacramento to tackle those big problems. They have seen me on the screen to be the big action hero, so they know that I can be the big action hero also in Sacramento."

Not the least of those long-ignored issues is the plight of the Delta that predecessor Davis so assiduously shunned eight years ago. Last week, without prompting, Schwarzenegger, during another "town hall" event in Bakersfield, endorsed the single most controversial approach to the Delta, a peripheral canal. Declaring that "we have studied this subject to death," he demanded action on the state's knottiest water issues, saying he wants to "build more conveyance and ... more water storage."

Schwarzenegger's aides quickly confirmed that by "conveyance," he meant a highly controversial peripheral canal, which would carry Sacramento River water around the Delta to the head of the California Aqueduct, thereby eliminating direct pumping out of the Delta that has reversed natural water flows and degraded the estuary's wildlife habitat and fish population.

A few days later, Lester Snow, director of the Department of Water Resources, posted a rationale for a peripheral canal on the governor's Web site. He said it would "help take the burden off our overtaxed Delta which, as evidenced by the tiny smelt, is facing an ecological crisis."

Therefore, the canal, is officially back on the water agenda -- and it's high time. It was approved by the Legislature more than a quarter-century ago (and partially excavated along Interstate 5) but blocked by a statewide referendum in 1982.

Controversial though the canal and building more water storage may be, both are legitimate pieces of any rational plan to deal with not only the degradation of the Delta, but the long-term water needs of a state that has 12 million more people than it did in 1982.

While environmental groups continue their knee-jerk opposition to both, they haven't offered any workable alternatives. Their implacability has -- ironically enough -- exacerbated the Delta's environmental degradation. Had the canal been in place, the state would not have had to turn off its pumps to save the few remaining Delta smelt, for example.

We may be seeing something of a change in the political weather over the long-stalled canal. Legislators who once would have automatically opposed it are now willing to consider it. They are also paying attention because, if ill effects of global warming come to pass, the Delta could see more saltwater intrusion and the state would need more storage to offset a smaller winter snowpack.

Schwarzenegger doesn't always succeed on the big issues he tackles. But at least he's trying, which is more than one could say about Davis.