

Op-Ed: Don't Let Politicians Sink Only Good Water Plan
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So, another legislative session has come and gone and our fearless "leaders" yet again, couldn't muster out any kind of comprehensive water overhaul.

Good!

The last thing we need is those bozos gumming up the works.

There is a plan in the offing that could really make a difference in California's mess of a water world -- the Bay Delta Conservation Plan.

It needs a couple of things -- our support, more involvement and commitment by the feds and for our state "looza-lators" to back off.

All the marches and rallies this summer and calls for the Obama administration to "turn on the pumps!" may be

exciting and cathartic. But the fact is, the Bay Delta Conservation Plan, unsexy as it is, is our single best chance for urban, environmental and ag interests to move forward together.

The hastily drawn up package of water bills that thankfully went down in flames earlier this month actually would have thrown roadblocks in front of this plan.

Thanks, politicians, thanks a lot. Can you please go back to not fixing the budget and leave water alone?

The Bay Delta plan was started about two and a half years ago and includes everyone from all sides of the water wars. And, yes, they've been finding common ground.

They've been looking in great detail at conservation, habitat improvement, all the issues that might be causing harm to fish species in the delta and best ways to move water safely and efficiently through, or around, the vast estuary.

This is different from other efforts, such as CalFed -- a kind of shotgun blast of money that went in all directions -- or the Bay Delta Vision, a vague 30,000-foot view of policy goals.

The Bay Delta Conservation Plan is a permitting process. Studies aren't being done just to have more studies.

They are incorporated in environmental documents as they go along with the intent that at the end, permits will be in place for whatever changes are needed, such as having an inspection point for boats coming into the delta to keep out invasive species.

And that mother of all controversies, a peripheral canal to move water around the delta.

"This is a smaller process, with greater intensity and focus on solving problems," said Brent Walthall, Kern County Water Agency's representative on the plan. "It is the single best effort we have going now."

And it's relatively on track with a draft due out toward the end of this year.

Walthall told me the greatest need now is for the federal government to be much more involved.

Deputy Secretary of the Interior David Hayes has shown some interest, but things are moving quickly for the worse and we need the feds on board.

First, a little background:

Two years ago a federal judge sided with environmentalists over an opinion that said giant federal and state pumps at the southern end of the delta (which bring water to farms in the San Joaquin Valley and drinking water to Los Angeles) were harming a fish -- the delta smelt listed as "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act.

The judge ordered reduced pumping and, of course, we went right into a second year of drought, making things dire.

A new biological opinion has since come out looking at other fish species, including salmon, and promises to reduce pumping further, even in wet years.

All of this has affected farmers mostly on the west side of the valley. In Kern County, our westsiders rely on the State Water project and considered themselves lucky to get 40 percent of what they contracted for (they had to pay for the full allotment, however).

The Farm Bureau estimates about 45,000 acres in Kern have been fallowed for lack of water and even more acres of permanent crops are being under-irrigated, keeping trees and vines alive but not producing at their peak.

North of us, farmers in the sprawling Westlands water district in western Fresno County rely on the federal Central Valley Project. They got 10 percent of their allotment.

That's why you're seeing the marches and rallies there as unemployment has skyrocketed.

Their immediate anger with the Obama administration involves those two biological opinions, which they want set aside. While the administration can't ignore the Endangered Species Act, Walthall told me, they can undertake a "reconsultation" when circumstances change or new science is available.

"The second opinion doesn't mesh with the first," he said. "It would release water from some reservoirs at certain times of the year to benefit the smelt, which would reduce or eliminate cold water protections for the salmon."

That conflict alone is reason enough for a reconsultation.

Absolutely.

Hayes and/or Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar need to do more than pop into the valley for photo ops and glad-handing. Get in the game and reexamine these opinions. What's the harm in checking your facts?

Meanwhile, local water folks are getting more anxious by the day.

What's been keeping our farmers afloat, so to speak, is groundwater banking, said Harry Starkey, general manager of Belridge Water Storage District.

"I have landowners now whose accounts are dry now," said. Without some kind of change, those accounts won't be replenished.

Even in wet years, "we lost access to all of that water, just with the smelt opinion," Starkey said. "The salmon opinion is just adding layers to the problem."

He also was clinging to the promise of the Bay Delta Conservation Plan to try and bring some stability back to ag water.

"It's our only ray of hope."

Now, if we can only keep bumbling politicians from blocking out the light.