

Editorial: Canal in state's future
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A QUARTER CENTURY after it was soundly defeated by California voters, the Peripheral Canal is making a comeback. This time around it has the support of some environmentalists as well as the backing of the respected Public Policy Institute of California.

What has changed over the past 26 years since the defeat of the canal is the viability of the Delta ecosystem. Several species of fish are in sharp decline, salinity levels are higher and water pumped through the Delta to the Central Valley and Southern California has been substantially cut back. Also, parts of the Bay Area have become more reliant on water from the Delta.

The Delta environment is forecast to worsen as sea levels rise, islands continue to subside and levees weaken, not to mention the ever-present threats of an earthquake or flood.

More than 23 million Californians and much of the state's huge agriculture industry rely on water that flows into the Delta and then is pumped out.

The conclusion of the PPIC is that the Delta will become less and less reliable as a conveyance of fresh water from sources in Northern California to users in the Bay Area, Central Valley and Southern California.

It is becoming increasingly clear that the only way to assure long-term adequate supplies of fresh water for much of the state is to send it around the Delta.

A canal would be the least expensive and most reliable method of delivering water where it is needed. Another major benefit, which the PPIC study concluded, is that a Peripheral Canal would have a better chance of protecting fish than the current water pumping, which kills many of them.

Despite the considerable long-term advantages of a Peripheral Canal, there continues to be considerable opposition to it, and with good reason.

Foes of the canal have always been fearful that there would not be enough fresh water flowing into the Delta.

That is a legitimate concern that needs to be addressed before any canal is considered. There could be constitutional guarantees of fresh water flows into the Delta and/or constraints on the volume of water pumped through a canal or aqueduct.

Increased storage in a larger or new reservoir would make it possible to guarantee enough fresh water to protect the Delta ecosystem, at least for a time.

But over the long term, if the sea level rises, there is no way to preserve the Delta as it is. Islands will have to be flooded and rising levels of salinity will be unavoidable. Then a canal would be the only way to move fresh water to users.

There are projects with voter-approved funds to protect fresh water supplies in case of an earthquake or flood that need to be completed now.

But some form of the Peripheral Canal will be needed in California's future and should be seriously considered now.