

Op-ed: For Delta, the moment of decision has come
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A GENERATION ago, we were among the many concerned citizens fighting a one-sided solution to a much bigger problem in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, California's jewel of an estuary that also transports the state's single largest water supply. A coalition of civic leaders and environmentalists rose up in 1982 to defeat the so-called "Peripheral Canal," which was proposed as a very big 22,000 cubic feet per second "unlined earthen ditch" that could have diverted 80 percent of the freshwater flows of the Sacramento River.

Why? Missing was a plan that linked needed improved conveyance to protecting the Delta environment, mandating conservation and capturing surplus water in wet years with new surface and groundwater storage, including off-stream reservoirs called "water banks."

That canal proposal deserved to go down to defeat. The Delta, however, did not deserve what has happened since. Years of indecision and piecemeal planning have led to a Delta on the brink of environmental collapse, threatening to bring down with it California's \$1.8 trillion economy that runs on water.

The Legislature, armed with advice about comprehensive planning from Gov. Schwarzenegger's Delta Vision Blue Ribbon Task Force, is finally confronting the complex problems in the estuary.

Legislation advancing a sweeping set of needed reforms is being debated in the Capitol. There are voices calling for the Legislature to delay, go home and to debate the Delta solutions yet again next year. That is no longer an option. The time has come to put the Delta and California's water system on a mutual path to recovery.

The foundation of a true Delta solution lies in this straightforward principle: Managing the Delta must be based on two coequal goals — ecosystem restoration and water supply reliability. Put another way, these are two coequal constraints. So long as the Delta ecosystem continues to suffer, regulations and restrictions will continue to starve water districts representing 25 million Californians throughout the state of a much-needed supply.

The Delta, now governed by more than 200 agencies with varying jurisdictions, needs a single oversight entity. This new Delta council needs to oversee implementation of a comprehensive Delta Plan to address both the failing ecosystem and water supply reliability, beginning with the strategic plan prepared by the Governor's Delta Vision Task Force and the Bay Delta Conservation Plan developed by his administration.

That plan, which will need to be refined and adapted over time based on empirical evidence of what works, needs to coordinate actions by all government agencies to achieve and sustain the two coequal goals.

Efforts also must proceed to finally address the Delta's water conveyance system as part of the comprehensive Delta Plan—true in 1982 as well as today. The Delta Vision Task Force recommended an aggressive dual-action approach of improving through-Delta conveyance to ensure adequate freshwater flows in the estuary while designing, permitting and constructing an appropriately-sized isolated component to reduce current environmental impacts and protect water supplies.

This is a practical approach to link a long-needed conveyance fix — improved through-Delta flows coupled with a canal, a tunnel or some combination — to the rest of a Delta solution. That's why action by the Legislature is so important.

Before the Legislature are proposals to establish a new Delta governance structure, adopt a comprehensive Delta plan, and advance efforts by state and federal wildlife and water agencies to couple conveyance and "water bank" storage improvements with habitat restoration.

Other elements of the legislative package call for reducing per-capita water use in California by the year 2020 and establishing a new Delta conservancy to oversee habitat restoration and advance efforts to maintain a vibrant Delta with recreation, agriculture and treasured communities.

The defeat of the 1982 Peripheral Canal became so divisive among regions of the state because the proposal was not a true investment plan for the Delta that protected the environment and constructed necessary water facilities.

We now have a real chance to craft that investment plan and unite as one state to solve one of our biggest problems. This moment of decision for the Delta has been a long time in the making. Now we must make the most of this historic opportunity.