

Op-ed: Fixing the delta is critical to the desert's future
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The Sacramento-San Joaquin Bay Delta may be hundreds of miles away, but it has a direct impact on all of us that reside and work in the Coachella Valley. In our region, we rely on imported water from the State Water Project and Colorado River to supplement our precious groundwater and ensure a reliable water supply for generations to come.

However, as many have read in recent months, we are experiencing an unprecedented statewide water crisis. The delta is the heart of the state's water supply system, a “hub” where a portion of freshwater from the Sierra watershed (about 18 percent in an average water year) is routed to 25 million residents, businesses and farms in the Bay Area, Central and Southern California — including the Coachella Valley.

Recently, the delta's ecosystem has collapsed because of many factors, while its fragile levees are at risk from earthquakes, sea level rise and floods. The result: fisheries are failing, water deliveries have been curtailed and future water supplies are uncertain.

Conservation plan would work

While this is an unprecedented water crisis, there is an important and comprehensive solution being developed now called the Bay Delta Conservation Plan. Even those of us in the far-reaching regions of the desert should be watching it closely. Without a fix for the delta, the Coachella Valley faces an uncertain water supply future.

The Bay Delta Conservation Plan, jointly being developed by a diverse collection of public water agencies, fish biologists, environmentalists, engineers and policy experts, seeks to create a more modern and stable water supply for California, while protecting and enhancing the environment of the delta. Those involved are committed to the equal goals of creating a more reliable water system and helping fish species recover in the delta.

The Bay Delta Conservation Plan effort is collaborative, science-based and public. The issues are difficult and often controversial. Perspectives around the table vary widely, leading to a candid and lively debate. Out of this transparent process, common ground and real solutions — elusive in the past — are emerging.

Design a new delivery system

The Bay Delta Conservation Plan will create a permitting process to enable water providers to design a new delivery system that will help protect endangered fish species. This is an important improvement on the “one at a time” approach historically followed by wildlife agencies when issuing permits for projects where an endangered species is involved. In contrast, the Bay Delta Conservation Plan process goes far beyond bare-bones compliance with individual endangered species laws: it aids the recovery of numerous species at once and the restoration of thousands of acres of habitat.

California's existing state and federal water delivery systems were built half a century ago and no longer meet the modern-day economic and environmental needs of the state. A critical element of the conservation plan involves the study of a new canal or other structure to separate the conveyance of freshwater deliveries from the natural flows in the delta — think of it as a new “bypass” for an ailing system. A new conveyance structure would be paid for by public water agencies, not the state general fund. This new approach is much different from the last time California considered building a new canal. The conservation plan represents a far more comprehensive plan, one that would help protect salmon and other fish, and also restore water supplies.

Habitat restoration is important

Respected leaders and organizations around California, representing many different constituencies and diverse viewpoints, have voiced support for a conceptual delta fix that includes both habitat restoration and an improved water conveyance system. They include Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein, Association of California Water Agencies, The Nature Conservancy, California Farm Bureau Federation, California Chamber of Commerce, nonpartisan think tanks such as the Public Policy Institute of California, local water districts from Northern, Central and Southern California, and newspapers around the state.

Our desert residents and businesses are making important gains in expanding conservation and water efficiency programs and our water district will continue to make important investments in increasing local supplies — but it simply won't be enough if a major catastrophe strikes the delta. The conservation plan is the path forward and we are encouraged both by its objectives and progress to date. Keeping this important effort on track will be critical for our state leaders in the coming weeks.

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