

Op-Ed: Delta Needs Major Fix, Not a Band-Aid

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In 1991, the Central Coast Water Authority (CCWA) was created to provide reliable water supplies to residents, farms and businesses in Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo counties.

Given that we rely predominantly on water imported from the State Water Project, the state's primary water delivery system that funnels water through the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta to our region, we are extremely concerned with the serious water crisis that is gripping the Delta. It's a crisis all residents in our region should be focused on.

The Delta is the heart of the state's water supply system, a hub where a portion of freshwater from the Sierra Nevada mountain range watershed - about 18 percent in an average water year - is routed to 25 million residents and businesses and to hundreds of thousands of acres of farm land in the Bay Area, Central and Southern California, including those of us on the Central Coast.

Recently, the Delta's ecosystem has collapsed due to many factors, while its fragile levees are at risk from earthquakes, sea-level rise and floods. The result - fisheries are failing, state and federal water deliveries have been curtailed, and future water supplies are uncertain.

Because of the drought and the Delta uncertainty, CCWA has been active in developing innovative projects that help stretch and increase our local water supplies, storing excess water underground, participating in the state's drought water bank, facilitating water transfers from other water agencies, expanding conservation and much more.

These efforts alone, however, won't assure our customers a high-quality, reliable supply of water if there is a catastrophe in the Delta or if additional serious cutbacks in supplies are mandated to protect endangered fish species. We need a comprehensive solution for the Delta crisis, not more ineffective, piecemeal efforts that we have seen in the past.

There is encouraging news, however. A comprehensive and productive statewide planning process is unfolding now to address this situation, called the Bay Delta Conservation Plan.

The plan has two clear and equal objectives - create a more modern and stable water supply for California, while protecting and enhancing the environment of the Delta. The plan is being developed by a diverse collection of public water agencies, fish biologists, environmentalists, engineers and policy experts.

Perspectives around the table vary widely but decisions are being made through a collaborative, science-based and public process. Real solutions for a comprehensive fix are emerging through this process. Now is the time to watch closely and encourage our state leaders to push forward and not delay.

The 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 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 a half-century ago and no longer meet the modern-day economic and environmental needs of the state. A critical element of the plan involves the study of a possible new canal or other structure to separate the conveyance of freshwater deliveries from the natural flows in the Delta.

The situation is different today than it was a quarter century ago, the last time California considered building a canal. The new plan represents a far more comprehensive approach, one that would help protect salmon, smelt and other fish, and also restore water supplies. A new conveyance structure would be paid for by public water agencies, not the state general fund.

Here along the Central Coast, we are no strangers to complex plumbing challenges. The Delta is a broken system. We need to restore the ailing habitat and create a new bypass to deliver fresh water reliably to people, farms and businesses.

We recognize this will be no small feat. We have confidence solutions are achievable through the planning process, but any option must fix the Delta as a whole and avoid the Band-Aid approaches of the past.

Bill Brennan is executive director of the Central Coast Water Authority.