Frequently Asked Questions

Bay Delta Conservation Plan: Preserving the Delta & Our Water

Question: What is The Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta?

Answer: The Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta ("Delta"), a 700-mile maze of sloughs, canals, waterways, levees and islands located where the San Joaquin and Sacramento rivers converge, is the largest estuary on the West Coast and California's main water supply hub. In addition to supporting an important ecosystem, water from the Delta is indispensable to the agricultural industry and businesses that drive our state's economy.

Question: What is the State Water Project?

Answer: The California State Water Project (SWP) is the nation's largest state-built water and power development and delivery system that stretches from Northern California, through the Central Valley and into Southern California. It is a multi-faceted system that includes reservoirs, lakes, storage tanks, canals, tunnels, pipelines and the pumping and power plants that capture, store, and convey water to 27 public agencies. The State Water Contractors purchase water from the SWP, providing water to two out of every three Californians (approximately 25 million residents throughout Northern, Central and Southern California), irrigating 750,000 acres of prime agricultural lands and directly supporting $400 billion of the state's trillion-dollar economy.

The Central Valley Project (CVP), which also pumps water through the Delta, is operated by the federal government and supplies water to millions of acres of agricultural land in California.

Question: Who relies on the Delta?

Answer: The Delta is vital to nearly every region in the state. All told, drinking water for more than 25 million residents throughout Northern, Central and Southern California moves through the Delta, there are some areas that are 100% dependent on the Delta for delivery of their water supply. Some 7,000 agencies or cities have permits to develop and use water supplies from the Delta and its watershed region. In fact, the Delta is the largest single drinking water source in the nation.

Question: How is Northern California reliant on Delta water supplies?

Answer: Approximately three million people in five Bay Area counties (Alameda, Santa Clara, Contra Costa, Solano and Napa) receive drinking water from the Delta.

Question: Why is the Delta ecosystem so important?

Answer: The Delta is one of California's most significant habitats. As the largest estuary on the West Coast, the Delta is home to more than 700 native plant and animal species. A balanced ecosystem within the Delta is critical to its overall health and must be preserved for future generations.

The State Water Contractors, 27 public water agencies throughout the state, collectively serve 25 million residents in California and more than 750,000 acres of agricultural lands with water from the State Water Project.

For more information, please visit www.swc.org or call (916) 447-7357.

Question:
Does California's agricultural industry rely on the Delta?

Answer: Yes. California's $27 billion agricultural industry relies heavily on water supplied by the Delta. In fact, nearly half of the nation's fruits and vegetables are grown with water from the Delta. Water from the Delta irrigates more than 7 million acres of prime California agricultural lands, including lands within the Delta itself. Without a sufficient and reliable water supply, farms throughout the state would be unable to produce these crops. The agricultural industry is critical to the stability and continued success of California's economy, it accounts for 1.1 million jobs and more than $60 billion in personal income.

Question: How is the Delta significant to California's overall business climate and economy?

Answer: Water is essential to the day-to-day operations of businesses throughout the state. California's $1.6 trillion economy, the sixth largest in the world, can only be sustained with a reliable, cost effective and safe water supply. The Delta plays a critical role in supporting all of the state's industries and overall economy by providing water to businesses and farms throughout Northern, Central and Southern California. Without the water that moves through the Delta, businesses would be unable to function. An unexpected interruption of Delta operations could cause devastating short-term and long-term economic impacts throughout California.

Question: What other critical infrastructure is located in the Delta?

Answer: The Delta region is traversed by energy, communications and transportation facilities that are vital to the state's economic health. It is a crossroads for highway, rail, power, and other infrastructure. Three major highways cross through the Delta, as well as a major water pipeline (EBMUD), gas lines, high voltage transmission lines, and at least one major rail line. A disaster in the Delta could damage or destroy significant portions of the state's civil infrastructure system, creating major public safety threats.

Question: What are the challenges that threaten our water supply reliability today?

Answer: Mounting regulatory uncertainties, a struggling ecosystem, aged and deteriorating levees and potential impacts from climate change plague the Delta more so today than ever before. The Delta's deteriorating condition has made it an increasingly unreliable pathway for delivering water to 25 million Californians, businesses and farms throughout the state. We need a comprehensive solution that protects fish species and the Delta ecosystem and also creates a sustainable water delivery system.

Question: Are Delta levees at risk for failure?

Answer: Yes! A Katrina-style disaster is too real a possibility. The water that supports $400 billion of California's economy is currently delivered through the Delta via a series of antiquated levees. In fact, many of the Delta's 1,100 miles of deteriorating levees were constructed during the Gold Rush and are at serious risk for failure. The islands behind the levees consist of fragile peat soils, being exposed to grow crops, have oxidized, causing the islands to recede. The pathway for California's water supply is bordered by Delta islands that are many feet below sea level — were they to fail, salt water from the bay would rush into the Delta to fill the new void.

Scientists have warned there is a 66% chance of a catastrophic earthquake or massive flood event occurring within the next 50 years, either of which would destroy Delta levees in their current condition. Islands in the Delta would flood, the state's drinking water supply would be contaminated, infrastructure would be decimated and drastic changes in the Delta's ecosystem would occur. These impacts would be felt in nearly every region of California.

In 2006, the American Society of Civil Engineers of California gave California's levee system an "F" grade in its Infrastructure Report Card. The group reported that, "There is a real potential for catastrophic disaster to life and property in California. This is due to the fragile condition of our levee system. These fragile levee systems protect thousands of homes and billions of dollars in critical infrastructure."

In addition, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers released a report in late January of last year that identified 122 poorly maintained levees in the United States and Puerto Rico, including 37 levees in California, primarily in the northern part of the state.

Question: How is climate change affecting the Delta?

Answer: Rising sea levels caused by climate change threaten to contaminate our drinking water supply by pushing salty water from the San Francisco Bay into the Delta's freshwater. Should the Delta's water become contaminated, millions of Californians in Northern, Central and Southern California and millions of acres of farmlands would be at risk for interrupted water supply. In addition, the change in salinity could further compromise the Delta's already delicate ecosystem.

Already, sea levels at the Golden Gate Bridge have risen nearly ? foot. Scientists predict that the sea level will rise another ? foot to more than 3 feet during the next 100 years. Recently, the Delta Vision Blue Ribbon Task Force recommended that California plan for a 55-inch rise in sea level in the Delta.

Question: Are the Delta's fish species at risk?

Answer: The Delta contains more than 700 native plant and animal species and is the largest estuary on the West Coast. In recent years, the Delta has experienced a decline in certain fish populations, including the endangered Delta Smelt. Potential causes of the decline include invasive species, toxics, power plant operations, local diversions by farmers and Delta pumping operations. Finding a solution that stabilizes and sustains the Delta's important natural resources is a critical element of any long- term plan.

Question: What other water quality challenges does the Delta face?

Answer: In addition to increasing salinity levels, the Delta's water quality is worsened by agricultural and municipal drainage and runoff, making it a continuing challenge to adhere to water quality mandates established by state and regional regulatory agencies.

Question: How have the recent regulatory and legal challenges in the Delta impacted the state's water supply and deliveries?

Answer: A federal court ordered a massive reduction in water supplies – up to nearly one-third — from the SWP and CVP, the state's two largest water delivery systems, to protect an endangered fish species, the Delta smelt. As of March 2008, 660,000 acre-feet of water had already been cut, enough to serve more than 5.3 million people for one year. These court-ordered pumping restrictions will be in effect until a revised biological opinion for Delta smelt is prepared that will ensure the projects' compliance with the Endangered Species Act. However, until we find a better way of conveying water to Northern, Central and Southern California, the state will likely face similar regulatory restrictions.

In addition to the court-ordered cutbacks to help protect the Delta smelt, a federal court this year will also be considering measures to help protect salmon as that biological opinion is being revised. This could mean additional court-ordered water cutbacks.

Question: What other factors are affecting water deliveries this year?

Answer: The SWP is projected to get only 15% of the water it is contracted to receive in 2009. This low allocation is a result of several factors, including the court-ordered cutbacks and last year's dry conditions. In addition, Governor Schwarzenegger has declared that California is in a state of drought and proclaimed a state of emergency. Meanwhile, the Colorado River Basin, which provides up to one-third of Southern California's water supply, has experienced drought during eight of the past nine years.

Question: How are local water agencies responding to the limited water allocations?

These challenges continue to cause great concern among state officials and public water agencies. As a result, water restrictions and rate hikes are being imposed this year to help relieve potential water shortages in 2009. Some local agency actions and impacts include:

- Mandatory conservation programs are in place in Long Beach, and many others are ramping up voluntary conservation efforts.
- Decisions on new housing and retail developments in Riverside County are on hold because the necessary water supplies cannot be guaranteed.
- The state's largest water wholesaler, Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, will increase its water rates by 14% next year due in part to the cost of acquiring water to off-set reduced SWP supplies.
- Water agencies in the San Francisco Bay Area and elsewhere are dipping into reserves, which means they will have less water available to meet needs if next year is dry. They also have less water available to replenish groundwater basins that were drawn down in recent dry years.

Question: What do this year's conditions mean for next year's water supply?

Answer: This year, public water agencies must tap into already low reserves, which means that less water and storage capacity will be available in 2009. Residents, farms and businesses need to brace for significant impacts next year because of this year's conditions.

Question: How do all the risks and challenges surrounding the Delta directly affect Californians?

Answer: A catastrophe in the Delta, such as an earthquake or flood event, could cut off water supplies to 25 million Californians, 7 million acres of farmland, and businesses throughout California, effectively shutting down the state's operations, threatening the health and safety of the general public and causing a significant blow to the state's economy. In addition, dry conditions, depleted emergency sources of water, and continued legal and regulatory challenges have the potential to impact supplies for water users in 2008 and beyond.

Along with severe water supply impacts, a catastrophic event in the Delta also has the potential to severely damage and destroy local infrastructure including highways, electrical transmission lines, gas lines and railroads. Should this occur, there would be considerable regional and statewide implications.

Question: What did the 2008 PPIC study recommend that the state do about the current challenges in the Delta?

Answer: The Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) released a study in July 2008 that said a peripheral canal is the "best strategy" for saving the Delta ecosystem and ensuring a reliable water supply for California. This report, "Comparing Futures for the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta," followed a 2007 PPIC report that recommended changes in the way that the Delta is managed. One of those recommendations included studying the option of a peripheral canal. The report underscored the need for bold steps to restore the Delta ecosystem and build a new, smarter water delivery system.

To read the entire PPIC study, please visit www.ppic.org.

Question: How can we solve the crisis in the Delta?

Answer: It is clear that the estuary is struggling and the Delta is no longer a reliable pathway to deliver water to 25 million Californians, businesses and farms throughout the state. The Delta needs a major overhaul that protects fish species and creates a sustainable water delivery system.

Right now, water agencies, environmental organizations, state and federal agencies and other stakeholders are working on a solution through the Bay Delta Conservation Plan (BDCP) and the Governor's Delta Vision Blue Ribbon Task Force.

Question: What is the Bay Delta Conservation Plan?

Answer: The BDCP is a collaborative effort between water agencies, environmental organizations and state and federal agencies to map out a comprehensive conservation plan for the deteriorating Delta. It is a more

comprehensive way of complying with the state and federal Endangered Species Act. Rather than regulating threatened species individually, the BDCP aims to find a multi-species habitat strategy that combines the restoration of the ecosystem with operations of the water systems. The BDCP proposes separating water supply movement from the Delta ecosystem to protect fish while meeting the co-equal goal of water deliveries for human use.

The goal of the BDCP is to find the best way to protect and restore the estuary while providing a reliable water supply for California. For more information on the BDCP, please visit http://baydeltaoffice.water.ca.gov/sdb/bdcp/index_bdcp.cfm.

Question: How will the BDCP benefit Californians?

Answer: The BDCP benefits Californians in several ways. The plan will help restore and protect a critical ecosystem in our state, and it simultaneously makes California's water supply cleaner and more reliable.

Separating water supply movement from the estuary through a new conveyance facility would protect fish by diverting Sierra mountain water from the Sacramento River north of the Delta and routing it around the fragile Delta to the delivery facilities. By doing so, water supplies could be delivered more reliably to people, businesses and farms, avoiding the current regulatory uncertainties. In addition, diverting water from a higher site in the Delta will provide a cleaner, safer water supply for millions of Californians. It will also reduce the risk of saltwater contamination of drinking water supplies now posed by earthquakes, levee failure and climate change-induced sea-level rise.

Question: What is the path forward for the BDCP in 2008?

Answer: Mapping out a comprehensive solution for the Delta is a lengthy process. There are still many questions that need to be answered about the specifics of a long-term habitat restoration plan for the Delta and a new conveyance facility. To get this started, the Governor and the California Department of Water Resources (DWR) have launched the environmental review process for the BDCP, and towards the end of 2009 a conservation strategy plan will be presented by BDCP.

Question: What is the Delta Vision Blue Ribbon Task Force?

Answer: Governor Schwarzenegger signed an Executive Order in September 2006 calling for the development of a strategic vision for the ailing Delta, a critical ecosystem and the pathway for delivering water to 25 million Californians and 3 million acres of farmland. In his Executive Order, the Governor appointed the independent Delta Vision Blue Ribbon Task Force and the Delta Vision Committee to provide recommendations on how to best manage the Delta. He also called for the establishment of a Stakeholder Coordination Group to play a role in developing the vision and strategic plan for the Delta. The Delta Vision Committee will be presenting its final recommendations at the end of this year.

The Delta Vision Blue Ribbon Task Force has also identified new water conveyance as integral to restoring the Delta ecosystem.

Question: How does the BDCP complement the Delta Vision process?

Answer: The BDCP environmental review process is being done in sync with the Governor's Delta Vision Blue Ribbon Task Force. The group's recommendations for a comprehensive management strategy for the Delta will be included in the BDCP environmental review process.

Question: Who supports a comprehensive solution for the Delta?

Answer: Local government, public policy think tanks, business, agriculture, public water agencies, wildlife agencies, labor, Democrats and Republicans have all joined with Governor Schwarzenegger and U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein in calling for a comprehensive solution for the Delta, including new options for conveyance.

Question: What interest groups and constituencies should be involved in this process?

Answer: Literally every region and sector of California could be seriously impacted by a catastrophic Delta event. Public health, public safety, local government, business, agricultural, labor, water and environmental leaders must work together to find an effective solution this year.

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