

Op-ed: Best and last chance at water reform
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By Ted Grandsen
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Time is running out in Sacramento for the Legislature to approve a series of bills that could dramatically improve Ventura County's water future while healing the state's most important estuary, the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

But, there is still time to craft a bold package and to do it right.

With the Delta and California's water system in crisis, coming up empty in the Legislature and waiting another year for a solution is not an acceptable option.

An essential water source for much of Ventura County comes across the Delta and reaches our communities via the State Water Project's aqueduct system. For years, this system helped shield the county from shortages by allowing the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California to capture supplies during average and wet winters to fill reservoirs and groundwater basins.

Today, the Delta is a dangerous choke point in this water system. The estuary's environmental health is in rapid decline because of many factors. Lawsuits and new environmental regulations to protect threatened fisheries have severely constricted water supplies. Three consecutive dry years have depleted much of Southern California's water reserves, forcing water districts to cope with various water-conservation mandates.

It will take dramatic changes in the Delta to restore the ecosystem and create a better, more-reliable water supply.

A solution, however, has emerged through a historic planning effort led by state and federal agencies and supported by water districts and key environmental groups.

The Bay Delta Conservation Plan, now in draft form, calls for one of the nation's most ambitious restoration projects, with tens of thousands of acres of new wetlands in the Delta. It also proposes expansion of the water system so that supplies can either move through or across the estuary (via a new canal, tunnel or some combination of the two). A final conservation plan is due next year.

The Legislature, meanwhile, must play a key role before the legislative session concludes Friday. Through a series of five bills, legislative leaders are seeking to coordinate the actions of literally dozens of government agencies in the Delta through a new "stewardship council" and a new conservancy that would advance restoration and economic development activities.

They also need to identify the public funds to match the billions of dollars that water agencies throughout the state are expected to invest in water-system and ecosystem improvements.

This legislative package must avoid new roadblocks. For example, some worrisome initial proposals would delay the Bay Delta Conservation Plan and create new layers of approval. Another proposal would

set an unrealistic timetable for a state board to review the flow requirements for rivers throughout Northern California.

Details like these can make the difference between a strategy that works and one that could set the Delta and California water policy in the wrong direction.

But there is reason to hope. Legislative committees in recent weeks have spent hours reviewing and discussing some initial proposals. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's administration has provided helpful advice. And key legislative leaders have made water a top priority for the end of this session, setting up a "conference committee" for the Senate and Assembly to craft a package of bills for votes in both houses.

It would be tempting to listen to those voices in Sacramento suggesting that California forget about the water crisis until next year. That would be wrong.

The decisions won't get easier, and the fundamental problem will remain unresolved. The Delta needs help now and the 25 million Californians dependent upon it need water reliability.

The statewide water system needs modernizing. And we need to expand conservation efforts permanently here in Ventura County and throughout the state to ensure our future demands don't exceed available supply.

With a historic legislative package of water reforms, we can all be part of the solution.

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