

Stockton Record

October 29, 2011

State and federal agencies took a step Friday toward appeasing Delta-area lawmakers who earlier complained that a new planning agreement gives water exporters "unprecedented influence" over the future of the estuary.

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and state Department of Water Resources announced that the planning agreement will be subject to public comment before it takes effect.

That's short of what the lawmakers - including U.S. Rep. Jerry McNerney, D-Pleasanton - had asked for. They wanted the agreement to be withdrawn entirely.

"While this short period for public comment is a step in the right direction, this announcement falls short of what is needed," McNerney said Friday.

McNerney and representatives George Miller, Mike Thompson, Doris Matsui and John Garamendi had expressed concern that the agreement gives agencies an unfair amount of influence in the conservation plan, which aims to improve the Delta's ecosystem while also likely building a peripheral canal or tunnel to divert flows to cities and farms as far south as San Diego.

The lawmakers were upset that the agreement gives water contractors "early and exclusive access" to draft reports and control over the consultants who are writing them.

Those contractors have paid for the conservation plan, spending about \$125 million so far. Officials have said about \$250 million will be needed to finish writing the plan by 2013.

While granting the public time to review the new agreement, the U.S. Department of the Interior said in a paper published on the conservation plan website that the significant involvement of the water contractors is "appropriate and fully consistent" with how habitat conservation plans have been developed in the past.

Under the Endangered Species Act, the department said, the plan process is paid for and developed by the applicants but subject to review and approval by federal wildlife agencies.