

Tracy Press

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Elected officials representing Tracy are among those trying to change the minds of authors of a plan that could send Delta water to the southern San Joaquin Valley and Los Angeles Basin.

The sticking point is a "memorandum of agreement" to the Bay-Delta Conservation Plan that the U.S. Department of the Interior adopted in September.

State Sen. Lois Wolk, a Democrat who currently represents Tracy, says the memorandum was made among several water agencies and contractors, without including Northern California water interests or Delta property owners who rely on the water for the success of their businesses and agricultural production.

"It's very worrisome," Wolk said on Monday, Nov. 28.

Wolk and Assemblyman Jared Huffman, D-San Rafael, attended a recent hearing in which they learned the contractors of the proposed peripheral canal — a tunnel or canal that would ship fresh water around the lower reaches of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta and directly to pumps that send the water south — would have pre-approval rights to how water is transported under the memorandum.

That prompted Wolk and Huffman to draft a letter to the U.S. Department of the Interior, California Natural Resources Agency and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, asking them to rescind the memorandum and allow greater public participation.

"I have argued all along that we have to be part of the process," said Wolk, who has in the past

said Delta residents and farmers need a bigger seat at the negotiating table. "It doesn't appear that's the direction of the (water) contractors."

The outcome of the 50-year Bay-Delta Conservation Plan should be determined by finding out how much the water conveyance to Southern California would cost and if it would harm the Delta, its residents and communities, Wolk said.

Tracy is at a pivot point in the tug of war between those who want a greater volume and more reliable water pumped from the Delta, and those who rely on freshwater in the Delta itself.

Tracy receives a share of its water supply from pumps that also fill the Delta-Mendota Canal, a channel that provides water to farmers on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley south of Tracy. The city also gets part of its water from the upstream side of the pumps, via an agreement with the South San Joaquin Irrigation District.

The water supply for area farmers is a similar mishmash, with some districts, including the Banta-Carbona Irrigation District from Tracy to Vernalis, drawing water directly from the Delta and supplementing it from the canal system. Other irrigation districts, especially those west and farther south, such as the Del Puerto Water District, rely on the canal system much more heavily, augmenting their supply only with well water.

Wolk and other politicians who represent Delta-area communities contend a protected Delta is the key to the whole system.

"We have to have a clean, healthy Delta," Rep. Jerry McNerney, the Democratic congressman for Tracy, wrote in a separate letter. "Any plan that includes a canal would turn our Delta into a salty marsh, costing the community millions of dollars and countless jobs."

Wolk added that the plan should address California's \$30 billion agricultural economy — agriculture is San Joaquin County's top industry, worth more than \$1 billion annually.

She also said the plan must account for the hundreds of species of fish that need Delta waters to survive, people who live behind levees and need flood protection, and a provision of drinking water to many cities in the area.

Wolk said she doesn't oppose Southern California and the southern San Joaquin Valley getting some Delta water, just that it needs to be balanced with Northern California's interests.

"No one in the Delta is saying we can't share," Wolk said. "We have to figure out first how much water you need in the Delta. The remainder, in good (rainy) years, could be transferred, which is reasonable."

McNerney charged that the memorandum was developed behind closed doors and gives water export agencies south of the Delta and in Southern California unprecedented influence over California's fresh-water supply.

Several other Northern California legislators joined Wolk and Huffman in signing the letter, and several members of the House of Representatives in the region added their names to McNerney's in a similar letter.

According to the California Natural Resources Agency, there will be plenty of opportunity for the public to say what they think of the Bay-Delta Conservation Plan. A thorough environmental impact report is being prepared, agency spokesman Richard Stapler said, and it should be available for public comment sometime next year.

For more information on the plan, visit www.baydeltaconservationplan.com. The Natural Resources Agency's response to the Northern California members of Congress can be found at www.tinyurl.com/cpaw2xv.

• Editor Jon Mendelson contributed to this report. • Ross Farrow is a writer for the Lodi News Sentinel.

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