

Contra Costa Times

November 29, 2011

Reacting to fierce criticism from Northern California members of Congress and others, state and federal water officials said Tuesday they would make public draft documents for a controversial water plan and no longer allow major water agencies to review them in advance.

The move amounts to a small retreat after state and federal water officials for weeks insisted that complaints about a new contract were misplaced.

Further changes to the contract, which cleared the way for another \$100 million in studies for the Bay Delta Conservation Plan, could come soon, officials said.

"Both the Brown administration and the Obama administration are committed to transparency," Deputy Interior Secretary David Hayes said. "The second reason we're doing it is the stakes are so high here."

The conservation plan would build a new set of aqueducts to carry water from the Sacramento River to improve the reliability of water supplies and reduce the environmental toll on the West Coast's largest estuary.

It is funded mostly by the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, Westlands Water District, Kern County Water Agency along with smaller contractors that rely on state and federal water delivery projects, including the Santa Clara Valley Water District.

After five years and \$150 million, studies are still not completed. In order to secure another \$100 million from the water agencies for the remainder of the work, those agencies

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this summer reached a new agreement that gave them additional control over the planning.

The terms of that agreement generated fierce criticism from Rep. George Miller, D-Martinez, and others. They contend that it gives the contractors an unfair advantage. That could harm salmon populations, Delta residents, local governments and the environment, they contend.

One critic said the change announced Tuesday was appreciated but still a very small step.

"The entire process has been conducted in secrecy and without the Delta region represented. We need a more steadfast guarantee that our input will be included in the Bay Delta Plan," Rep. Jerry McNerney, D-Pleasanton, said in a news release.

The head of a water agencies' association said that the decision to release the documents was necessary.

"We appreciate the state and federal agencies' commitment to advancing the Bay Delta Conservation Plan and certainly hope that this additional layer of transparency keeps this critical effort on track and moving forward toward its goals," Terry Erlewine, general manager for the State Water Contractors, said in an email sent by the group's public relations firm.

"Our public water agencies have made some tough compromises in the spirit of progress and collaboration because the Bay Delta Conservation Plan remains our best chance at fixing the Delta ecosystem and restoring a reliable water supply."

In addition to giving contractors the ability to review consultants' reports before the general public, the contract also contains other provisions that raised criticism. Specifically, critics say the contract:

- Lays out an unrealistic schedule that could limit consideration of alternatives.

- Raises expectations that more water will be delivered to contractors without making similar commitments to environmental improvement.

- Gives water agencies funding the plan more control over the direction of the plan than others, including Delta communities who say their well-being is at stake.