

Stockton Record

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Plan diverts less water but does little to calm worries

By July, Gov. Jerry Brown is expected to announce plans to build a canal or tunnel to siphon water past the Delta - a multibillion-dollar project that people around Stockton have been fighting for decades.

But some details are already emerging about where the announcement is heading. And so far, Delta advocates don't like what they're hearing.

The governor's representatives briefed environmentalists, water users and a coalition of Delta counties this week, and, while nothing has been placed on paper, the discussion is indeed centering on a tunnel beneath the Delta.

The tunnel would take water from the Sacramento River in the north and feed it to the existing giant export pumps near Tracy. From there, the water would be pumped to cities and farms from the Bay Area to San Diego.

The tunnel intakes would be capable of diverting 9,000 cubic feet of water per second - less than the 15,000 cfs that has been discussed in the past but still enough to take a substantial amount of the river at certain times of year.

The concept also calls for restoring 30,000 acres of wetland habitat in the Delta over the next 15 years while the tunnel is being built.

By the end of that 15-year period, scientists would have a better idea what combination of flows through the Delta and restored habitat would be needed to preserve the Delta's fragile environment while also allowing for more reliable water exports.

It is a precarious balancing act, since it's unclear at the moment whether more habitat will really mean better conditions for fish.

To opponents, the new details suggest the state would build a \$13 billion tunnel before knowing whether it will work and how to use it. They say there will be pressure, once the facility is built, to operate it to its maximum capacity - regardless of what the science says at the end of the 15 years.

The local fear has always been that taking too much water from the Delta would turn the estuary into a salty backwater, devastating San Joaquin County agriculture.

Talk of a smaller tunnel is no comfort, said Barbara Barrigan-Parrilla, executive director of Stockton-based Restore the Delta, which opposes a peripheral canal or tunnel. The gravity-fed tunnel would be built large enough to handle flows greater than 9,000 cfs, leaving the possibility for future expansion, she said.

"It's not really a smaller capacity," Barrigan-Parrilla said. "Even 9,000 cfs could be disastrous for the Delta."

U.S. Rep. Jerry McNerney, D-Stockton, who was briefed by federal officials this week, issued a separate statement condemning the developments. McNerney, who is running for re-election in November, called upon Brown and U.S. Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar to "finally make this plan fair and equitable for the Delta communities."

Richard Stapler, a spokesman for the state Natural Resources Agency, said there are "many, many details" to fill in before an announcement is made. The briefings were held to keep the disparate interest groups informed of conceptual ideas - whether they support or oppose a new aqueduct.

"The science is hugely important here," Stapler said. "That is the only way we could ever get to an answer."

In the big picture, supporters say a tunnel would safeguard the water supply in case of levee failure in the Delta, and would reduce the number of fish sucked into those giant south Delta pumps. Opponents counter that building up the levees would be a far cheaper solution.