



**Delta
Independent
Science Board**

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MEMORANDUM

Date: March 15, 2023

To: United States Army Corps of Engineers

Sent via email: DLL-DCP-EIS@usace.army.mil

Zachary.M.Simmons@usace.army.mil

From: Delta Independent Science Board

Subject: Comments on the Delta Conveyance Project Draft Environmental Impact Statement

The Delta Independent Science Board (Delta ISB) reviewed the Delta Conveyance Project draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) in accordance with our responsibilities to evaluate the broad range of scientific programs that support adaptive management of the Delta, including review of major Delta Conveyance proposals. Our focus was on a scientific/technical assessment of the quality and scope of the scientific analyses used for informing decisions. Due to the length of the draft EIS, the comprehensive coverage of the topics, and the short period allowed for review, the Delta ISB decided to provide a general review of selected environmental topics.

We believe that the major concerns and comments provided in our recent review of the draft Delta Conveyance Project Environmental Impact Report (EIR) also apply to the draft EIS and should be carefully considered. We are including our review of the draft EIR as part of our review of the draft EIS (see attachment). In the draft EIR, the Delta ISB identified some shortcomings in the science applied and concluded that it showed a lack of "1) clear illustrations of how the proposed project achieves the water supply and environmental benefits claimed; 2) clear evidence to support some of the findings of less than significant impacts; and 3) clear descriptions of uncertainty stemming from climate effects, mitigation effectiveness, analytic methods, and incomplete quantitative and mechanistic understanding of some

underlying processes and relationships.” These and other omissions lead to a partially inadequate representation and discussion of potential project impacts and benefits.

The draft EIS relies heavily on analyses and conclusions of the draft EIR. It appears that a comprehensive re-assessment of assumptions, methods, and analyses that were reported in the EIR was not performed, and new scientific approaches were not specifically identified. However, relative to the draft EIR, the draft EIS shows several improvements. The cumulative analysis was somewhat more comprehensive and the presentation of the material was clear and concise, although the scope of results is narrower than in the draft EIR. Limiting the discussion to the preferred tunnel alignments helped to streamline the report. The explanation of which planning horizons were being compared was clarified in some cases.

In addition, we add the following specific comments on the draft EIS:

1. The draft EIS emphasizes the impacts of construction, rather than project operations, on outcomes. This concern is particularly acute for understanding the projected impacts on the aquatic ecosystem and for evaluating effectiveness of mitigation efforts. The draft EIS carries forward the conclusion that mitigation will be able to fully offset harms. However, the available science suggests the outcomes of mitigation are highly uncertain.
2. Some risks are given uneven treatment. For example, the draft EIS provides relatively detailed descriptions of the potential risks of construction and maintenance-related accidental release of construction chemicals and wastes to surface waters, and resuspension of contaminated sediments due to construction and dredging for mitigation and restoration projects, desalination plants, and related actions (Chapter 3.4, Fisheries and Aquatic Habitat). However, such risk analyses are entirely missing for the project alternatives. This omission makes it appear as if such effects would not occur during project construction and operation, or for the project alternatives.
3. The draft EIS discusses more of the presumed consequences of the no-action-alternative, relative to the draft EIR, but it does not provide detailed analyses (as stated on page 2-18) to improve understanding of the effects of project alternatives. The qualitative discussion of future alternatives demonstrates that those managing the water delivery system have multiple options to compensate for changing variability in water supply without the

Delta Conveyance Project, and that each option has associated effects on the environment. However, without making projections that include future operation, the analysis does not provide a full accounting of net changes that would result from the Delta Conveyance Project.

4. Because climate change influences on operations were not included in the analysis of future conditions (Table 3.9-1), the analyses provided are incomplete for understanding project effects on many endpoints. Of major concern is the final conclusion that the effect of climate change on all action alternatives “does not appear to be significant” (Section 3.6.4.1, Environmental Consequences, page 3.6-13) despite several impacts (e.g., critical fish habitat, flooding, salinity intrusion) being discussed prior to that statement. The Delta ISB draft EIR review identified climate change assessment as an area of major concern, in part because of the potential for effects beyond 2040 and compounding effects (see Delta ISB review: [major concern #3 in Section 1.1 on page 8](#) and [Section 4.3 on page 19](#)).

The draft EIS appears to have relied entirely on draft EIR modeling. Therefore, it is unclear how its authors arrived at the aforementioned conclusion without addressing the Delta ISB’s concerns. The draft EIS correctly identifies some fundamental questions related to climate change and some implications of those questions on conveyance alternatives (Section 3.6.2, Purpose). However, it is not apparent that additional long-term climate change analyses were conducted for this report, beyond the design modeling. The discussion in Section 2.4.3 (Design for Climate Change and Sea Level Rise) implies that a time horizon of 2100 was used in analysis, but it appears to have been applied only for project design and not impact assessment, where a time horizon of 2040 was used. The draft EIS refers to a 100-year maintenance schedule of the Delta Conveyance Project, which confirms the need to consider its long design life.

5. We recommend that the draft EIS provides clear documentation of any changes in analytic scope and the methods used to arrive at findings of impact significance that differ from the results in the draft EIR. The draft EIS covers terrestrial species not evaluated in the EIR, but the basis for the conclusions drawn is not provided. Similarly, the justification for differing conclusions about the significance of a few socio-economic endpoints, relative to the EIR, are not well explained.

6. The draft EIS is lacking analyses of water quality effects on biota as well as important indirect pathways of such effects on human health and well-being. With regard to water quality (including nutrients and contaminants), the draft EIS relies entirely on information provided in the draft EIR, and focuses on public health considerations (page 3.17-44), with the only exception being selenium effects on birds (page 3.5-60). For example, the potential for changes in nutrient concentrations to interact with hydrologic change to exacerbate ecosystem and public health impacts associated with harmful algal blooms (HABs) is not addressed. Greater detail on the potential effects of construction and maintenance of the project alternatives on water quality, and the consequences of altered flows on species of concern and their habitats are needed to adequately assess potential project effects. In addition, such potential changes in the occurrence of HABs and other biotic effects are not considered in an environmental justice framework to determine the extent to which communities already impacted by ecosystem degradation will be disproportionately affected by future changes associated with project construction and operation.
7. The summary of Section 3.10.1.1 (Geology and Seismicity) includes information about Bay area faults that could lead to a biased interpretation of the seismic hazard in the Delta. This draft EIS section begins by referencing the active faults in the Bay area that are outside the study area and then alludes to the "blind thrusts" beneath the Delta. The only blind thrust mentioned by name is the West Tracy Fault. The seismic sources in the Bay area are much more active than the sources in the Delta but are less important for projecting risk within the Delta. The emphasis on the Bay area faults could be misleading to readers unfamiliar with these nuances if they assume a connection between the Bay area faults and the potential for levee failure. Another concern is that the magnitudes of settlements caused by the tunnel boring and their potential impact on levees are not discussed.

Attachment:

[Review of the Draft Environmental Impact Report for the Delta Conveyance Project by the Delta Independent Science Board](#)

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