

Delta Vision

Phil Isenberg on the state's water policy

Story by Rich Ehsen

When Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger put together the Delta Vision Blue Ribbon Task Force in 2006, he knew he would need a strong, respected leader to find practical solutions for reforming the state's archaic water system. It probably wouldn't hurt if that person had strong roots in Northern California, where the bulk of California's liquid gold resides. By all accounts, the governor found both in Phil Isenberg, a longtime environmental advocate and former Sacramento mayor and state assemblyman. We sat down with him recently to talk about the state's efforts to bring its water system into the 21st century.

Comstock's: *Given the (political) differences that we know are in play, are you optimistic that we will have a comprehensive water reform package this year?*

Isenberg: For the two years that I've led the governor's task force, [I've] said there's a 10 percent chance of success. When I'm optimistic, I've said 20 percent. I must confess this year I got to 30 percent because Sen. Darrell Steinberg really pushed to present the issues in a consolidated way. But I've never been convinced that 2009 is much different than the past 160 years that we've been battling about water in California. There are some things that are coming clear, but they don't automatically lead to resolution of the issues. They lead to a sense of desperation of interests and regions and everyone else, and that just makes people terrified of any change.

Comstock's: *I've been told by various people that we are not that far away from agreement on most of the major issues, other than the proposal for a new peripheral canal. Do you agree with that assessment?*

Isenberg: No, it's a typical insider view of what an issue actually is. In the classic business sense of the word, this problem is all about supply and demand. If you start there, you learn a bunch of things none of the debaters really want to talk about. We've got 126 years of reported precipitation records in the state, and the fact is that the water supply in California is static. If you don't understand that, you don't understand anything. We've got a lot of water, but it comes on an irregular basis. Everyone knows that intellectually, but they think it doesn't matter. Well, it does matter immensely because people want the same amount of water in wet years, in average years and in dry years. They want it all available all the time, but there is no system we could create that could make that happen and get us through a prolonged drought unaffected. That is a major disconnect. I'll give you an example: Four days before we finished the final Delta Vision report, the water board sent us a fact sheet on water rights in California. If you add up the approximately 6,300 water permits issued in this state, they exceed the average annual flow in the Delta watershed by 8.4 times and exceed the highest record flow level by three times.

Comstock's: *Some people counter that, even if that is what those permits allow, nobody in their right mind really thinks they're going to get that, and you are in essence saying water managers don't have enough common sense to know what the realities are.*

Isenberg: Then let me ask you a question: What water district in California has ever said, "Although we contracted for 100,000 acre-feet, we've only ever taken 40,000 acre-feet, and that's all we're ever going to take forever?" Do you know any water district that has ever said that? The answer is of course not. They ask for more than they currently need by a lot because they're hedging against the future. If you have a system that promises more water than nature delivers, I don't care what these water managers say to you in private, not one of them will sign a letter to the state water board saying, "We surrender the excess."

Comstock's: Are you optimistic there will be a new conveyance built of some kind?

Isenberg: Yes, when the governor asked us to take a look 30 years out or so and see the future, there was not any doubt in our minds that an improved Delta conveyance system is in the future.

Comstock's: Given the likelihood that legislation is passed and the governor signs it right away, we know the next day lawsuits are going to be flying. ...

Isenberg: Oh yes, do nothing, or do something; there will be 50 lawsuits.

Comstock's: How long do you think something like this will actually take?

Isenberg: The idea of transporting water from the Delta came from a state study in the 1870s. From that, it took 70 years to start construction of what's now the Central Valley Project. The State Water Project was narrowly approved by the voters in 1960. So anywhere between now and 30 to 50 years from now, you'll find changes happening.

Comstock's: You mentioned supply earlier. New storage advocates often refer to dams and reservoirs as a way to get new supply. Is there such a thing as new supply?

Isenberg: The old theory of water is that new supply is when you go out and find water that no one is using. For example, we used to say that water that flows from the Sierra into San Francisco Bay serves no purpose. We know of course now that it serves a vast environmental purpose, but the theory was if human beings don't use this water, it's wasted. But the bottom line is that there isn't any unused water supply in the state of California that somebody can just take with no damage or at no cost — either economically, socially or culturally — and pretend that it's new. You can more efficiently use the water you have, or as some of the engineers colorfully say, you can squeeze the washcloth and get a slightly more reliable supply by reducing demand. But of course, the one thing politicians and water managers like to do the least is tell voters they have to pay more or use less. In California we're approaching the fourth dry year and people are still complaining that they can't wash their cars whenever they want. My head hurts.

Comstock's: What happens if we don't get a reform package done this year?

Isenberg: You will see continued pressure on fish species in the Delta and increased intervention by the federal government in regard to water exports. They will also likely make more mandatory species-by-species restrictions, which is an absolutely insane way to manage an ecosystem. You will also see an acceleration of the bitter conflicts between regions within the state, and not just between Southern and Northern California, but among water districts, sanitation facilities and in-Delta water users within this region. On the positive side, you will also see even greater voluntary conservation efforts statewide.

Comstock's: The Obama administration has become a player in this fight. Is that good or bad?

Isenberg: First of all, it's not clear exactly what the Obama administration is saying. Nor is it clear what people are hearing. A lot of people want to believe there will be a vast amount of free federal money coming here for us to do whatever we want with. I rate that very low on the probability scale. We may get money, but in the short term it can only fund the projects that are already in the pipeline. It can't fund a canal or more dams because those are at least a decade away. Either way, it doesn't constitute what we really need, a cohesive and modern state water policy.