Item 7

BDCP BlogRSS

Click here to contact us with your questions or comments about the BDCP Blog.

Go Back

BDCP: Based on Science, Environmental Research, and Economic Realities

February 14, 2013

By Jerry Meral
California Natural Resources Agency

A variety of conservation groups and municipal water agencies have proposed a "portfolio alternative" to be considered regarding movement of water through the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, and other water management concepts. They suggest this alternative be evaluated in the Bay Delta Conservation Plan. Some of the "portfolio alternative" concepts are being evaluated in the Plan and its environmental review documents, such as a 3,000 cfs facility and a variety of operating criteria with different water supply yields. Before they are finalized, the BDCP conservation measures and their effects will undergo a third round of independent scientific peer review.

Other components of the portfolio are clearly good ideas, and should be implemented. Everyone agrees that we need independent science to verify that the best conservation measures to improve the Delta ecosystem are carried out properly. Additional water conservation and wastewater recycling will be needed to meet California water demand in the coming decades. Storage in new or expanded surface and underground reservoirs will help us cope with drought and allow better flows through the Delta to benefit fish species. And continued investment in maintaining the Delta levee system is vital, since we will have to rely on those levees to protect the existing water export system for many years to come.

But the "portfolio alternative" suggests building a smaller Delta water transport facility. The idea is that building a smaller facility would save money which could be used for water conservation

and other purposes. However, the proponents of a smaller facility may not know that it would actually cost 60 percent as much as the larger one, but could move only a third of the water.

Also, the smaller facility would provide insufficient protection against a superstorm, earthquake, or sea-level rise, all of which could lead to permanent inundation of most of the Delta that is below sea level. When that happens, a smaller facility could only supply a small fraction of the Delta water currently used in the Bay Area, San Joaquin Valley and Southern California. This would cause tens of billions of dollars in economic damage and a huge loss of jobs.

Moreover, a smaller facility will require continued reliance on significant levels of exports from existing pumps in the southern part of the Delta. Pumping from these south delta facilities disrupts natural flow patterns in the Delta and contributes to poor conditions for native fish species. This year, early storms flushed Delta smelt into the area, which restricted the ability to pump water supplies needed by communities, farms, and businesses. More than 700,000 acre-feet of water supplies have been lost in order to protect Delta smelt, which will affect the economy across large parts of California. A smaller Delta water transport facility would not spare us from future conflicts like this. But a facility large enough to serve as the primary diversion point would have protected both fish and water supplies.

Sadly, the alternative proposal also suggests greatly reducing the scale of habitat restoration contemplated in the current Bay Delta Conservation Plan. This is remarkable, considering the alternative is proposed by some conservation groups. It may reflect their lack of faith that restored habitat will improve fish populations, a concept that federal and state fish agencies support.

We need to better manage our water statewide, maintain Delta levees as long as possible, and build a Delta water conveyance system capable of preparing us for emergencies and achieving the dual goals of ecosystem restoration and water supply reliability.