

OR96 Earth Law Center



P.O. Box 3283 Fremont, CA 94539
tel (510) 490-1690
www.earthlawcenter.org

February 2, 2012

Delta Stewardship Council
980 Ninth Street, Suite 1500
Sacramento, CA 95814
Attn: Terry Macaulay

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL: circumments@deltacouncil.ca.gov

RE: Comments on "Draft Delta Plan Program Environmental Impact Report"
(Nov. 2011), available at: <http://deltacouncil.ca.gov/delta-plan-draft-eir>

Dear Ms. Macaulay:

Earth Law Center works to advance legal rights for ecosystems and species to exist, thrive and evolve. On behalf of Earth Law Center, we welcome the opportunity to comment on the Delta Stewardship Council's Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR). We incorporate by reference the February 2012 joint DEIR comments submitted to the Delta Stewardship Council (Council) on behalf of the Environmental Water Caucus (EWC DEIR Comments). We also incorporate by reference the "Scoping Comments on Draft Environmental Impact Report for the Delta Plan" submitted by California Coastkeeper Alliance on January 28, 2011, and the Scoping Comments on the DEIR submitted by the EWC on January 25, 2011. OR96-1

In brief, as articulated in the EWC DEIR Comments, we call on the Delta Stewardship Council to revise the DEIR to meet CEQA requirements and ensure a legally enforceable Delta Plan that protects the health of the Delta ecosystems. By failing (among other lapses) to ensure necessary reductions in water exports as recommended by the State Water Board in their adopted flow criteria for the Bay-Delta Estuary, the DEIR and proposed Delta Plan will not achieve even the legislatively mandated "co-equal goals." More broadly, the DEIR and proposed Delta Plan fail to ensure the necessary review of strategies to advance water supply reliability consistent with the better standard of achieving an *overarching* goal of environmental sustainability. Given its decades-long time frame, the revised DEIR must assess all reasonable alternatives that will advance environmental sustainability over the long-term, a goal essential to protecting current and future interests in water sustainability. OR96-2

Specifically, we ask that the DEIR be revised to ensure the adequacy of its alternatives analysis by adding to Alternative 2 the necessary strategy, recommended in both sets of Scoping Comments referenced above, of establishing water rights for waterways. This legal tool would give the Delta's waterways the equivalent legal standing needed to effectively enforce the flows that science has shown the waterways need in order to survive. Finally, the revised DEIR should be re-circulated for public review and comment before adoption, so that the public and decisionmakers may fully exercise their stewardship responsibilities over the Delta and connected ecosystems. OR96-3 OR96-4

Response to comment OR96-1

Comment noted.

Response to comment OR96-2

The SWRCB report, Development of Flow Criteria for the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta Ecosystem, published on August 3, 2010 (Flow Criteria Report, SWRCB 2010a) was developed in response to a requirement of the Delta Reform Act to provide flow criteria to protect aquatic resources in the Delta. The Flow Criteria Report indicates that water supply modifications cannot necessarily affect existing water users with water rights in the Delta watershed. The Flow Criteria states that for "flow objectives with regulatory effect, [the SWRCB] must ensure the reasonable protection of beneficial uses, which may entail balancing of competing beneficial uses of water, including municipal and industrial uses, agricultural uses, and other environmental uses" (page 3 of the Flow Criteria Report). The Flow Criteria Report also indicated that, prior to adoption of revised water quality and flow objectives and criteria, future analysis would be conducted by the SWRCB of the impacts of "new flow objectives on the environment in the watersheds in which Delta flows originate, the Delta, and the areas in which Delta water is used. It will also include an analysis of the economic impacts that result from changed flow objectives" (page 3 of the Flow Criteria Report). The Flow Criteria Report also states that "Nothing in either the Delta Reform Act or in this report amends or otherwise affects the water rights of any person" (page 3 of the Flow Criteria Report). See also Master Response 5. The development of the range of alternatives for the EIR is described in Sections 2A of the Draft Program EIR and the Recirculated Draft Program EIR. See also Master Response 3.

Response to comment OR96-3

Alternative 2 was informed by information provided in comments to the Delta Stewardship Council from several environmental groups and does not represent one specific proposal. Alternative 2 includes the assumption that water users located in the area outside of the Delta that use Delta water would replace reduced Delta exports with water use efficiency and conservation actions, water transfers, and development of local and regional water supplies including recycled water, groundwater treatment, ocean desalination, and/or local storage facilities. Alternative 2 reduces reliance on Delta water supplies as compared to the Delta Plan. However, reduced reliance on Delta water supplies could increase the need for

implementation of new and/or expanded local and regional water supplies to serve agricultural and municipal and industrial water users in the San Joaquin Valley, San Francisco Bay Area, Central Coast, and Southern California areas. Alternative 2 would place more emphasis than the Delta Plan on development of water quality objectives and Total Maximum Daily Loads, which could result in an increased level of construction of facilities to meet the developed water quality objectives. Alternative 2 could result in less levee construction due to floodplain expansion than the Delta Plan, but more construction activities in the Delta to relocate structures from the floodplain. Please refer to Master Response 3.

Response to comment OR96-4

The Revised Project, which is the November 2012 Final Draft Delta Plan, was analyzed in the Recirculated Draft Program EIR (Volume 3 of the Draft Program EIR) which was circulated for public review and comment from November 30, 2012 through January 14, 2013.

THE DEIR MUST ANALYZE A REASONABLE RANGE OF ALTERNATIVES

Under CEQA, an EIR must analyze a reasonable range of alternatives to the project, or to the location of the project, that would feasibly attain most of the basic objectives while avoiding or substantially lessening the project's significant impacts.¹ A public agency must consider a "reasonable range" of alternatives, which is determined by a "rule of reason."² While there is no set number that constitutes a "reasonable range," the range should be sufficient to permit a reasonable choice of potentially feasible alternatives that present possible environmental advantages.³ The rule of reason requires that the environmental documents set forth the alternatives necessary to permit this reasoned choice. The key issue is whether the selection and discussion of alternatives fosters informed decision-making, as well as informed public participation.⁴

In addition to the flaws described in the EWC DEIR Comments (incorporated by reference), the DEIR fails to comply with CEQA's "range of alternatives" requirement by failing to also examine the establishment of water rights for waterways as a critical legal tool for managing our use of the Delta. The Delta Plan is characterized as a statewide plan with *at least* a 50-year horizon.⁵ In light of this time frame and the need for strong, effective action on behalf of the Delta's health, the issue of whether water rights for waterways may be an available management tool in the near term is not dispositive to the decision on whether this tool should be included in the alternatives for analysis. By law, the alternatives must foster informed decision-making and informed public opinion. As discussed further below, development and implementation of water rights for waterways is necessary to ensure Delta health and water supply reliability, and so it must be examined in the DEIR alternatives analysis to ensure the DEIR's adequacy under CEQA.

THE DEIR ALTERNATIVES ANALYSIS MUST INCLUDE ASSESSMENT OF "WATER RIGHTS FOR WATERWAYS" AS A CORE DELTA MANAGEMENT TOOL

Despite the Legislature's call for a "co-equal goals" approach to water management, the current water rights allocation system effectively places the environment's access to water on a second tier status, below essentially all human uses. Water rights are now allocated only to human uses; a waterway currently has no equivalent statutory right to keep necessary water in its system. This governance system conflicts with ecological science, which demonstrates that the water needs of Californians and our environment must be considered together. If water rights are to be the accounting system by which water is allocated, then the law must reflect the science: legal water rights must be developed, allocated and enforced to support water needs for healthy aquatic ecosystems and a healthy California.

¹ See Pub. Res. Code § 21100(b)(4); 14 Cal. Code Regs. § 15126.6(a); *Citizens for Quality Growth v. City of Mount Shasta*, 198 Cal.App.3d 433, 443-45 (1988).

² 14 Cal. Code Regs. § 15126.6(a); *Village Laguna of Laguna Beach, Inc. v. Board of Supervisors* 134 Cal. App.3d 1022, 1028 (1982); *Foundation for San Francisco's Architectural Heritage v. City & County of San Francisco*, 106 Cal.App.3d 893, 910 (1980).

³ *San Bernardino Valley Audubon Soc'y v. County of San Bernardino*, 155 Cal.App.3d 738, 750 (1984).

⁴ *Mann v. Cmty. Redevelopment Agency*, 233 Cal. App. 3d 1143, 1150 (1991).

⁵ DEIR, p. 2A-57.

Response to comment OR96-5

Regarding the range of alternatives considered, please refer to Master Response 3.

As described in Section 1 of the EIR and in Master Response 2, the study period for the EIR is through Year 2030. As described in Section 2B of the Draft Program EIR, the Delta Stewardship Council does not propose or contemplate directly authorizing any physical activities. Rather, through the Delta Plan, the Delta Stewardship Council seeks to influence the actions, activities, and/or projects of other agencies, the details of which would be under the jurisdiction and authority of the agencies that will propose them in the future and conduct future environmental review. The Delta Stewardship Council does not have the authority to establish water rights for waterways, as suggested in this comment. See Master Response 1.

Response to comment OR96-6

Please refer to response to comment OR96-5 and to Master Response 5.

OR96-5

OR96-6

Our water governance system currently addresses ecosystem water needs only indirectly, through such methods as conditions in permits, mandates (currently unimplemented) to prevent “waste and unreasonable use,” Water Code Section 1707 water transfers, the public trust doctrine, and application of the Endangered Species Act (ESA). None of these otherwise important tools are actual water *rights*, however, at a level equivalent to currently-allocated water rights for human uses. The result to date has been that ecosystem water needs are consistently relegated to a tangential role in state water planning, until the ecosystems and/or their non-human inhabitants are at the brink of collapse. That is when the ESA hammer falls – abruptly, with little foresight, controversially, and often too late.

Unless California is willing to write off fish and Delta-dependent wildlife for our children and grandchildren,⁶ California needs a legal system that allows the state to plan effectively for the water needs for *both* Californians and California’s ecosystems. The dangerously well-trod path of “use, overuse, environmental decline, then hasty and unplanned reaction” can begin to be broken by granting ecosystems the right to be at the planning table from the beginning, at a level truly “co-equal” to human water uses – rather than at the end when the damage is done. Again, if the state is committed to “co-equal” goals, and if water rights are to be the legal measure by which water is allocated for human uses in the state, then ecosystems also must be granted equivalent water rights.

The process for developing and allocating necessary water rights for waterways can be accomplished well within the time frame of the Delta Plan. The process could begin immediately with collection of the data needed to assess the amount and timing of water needed by Delta waterways to maintain their health. The State Water Resources Control Board’s flow criteria, adopted to protect Delta ecosystems,⁷ are the key starting point. Significant additional research has been done over the years in assessing overall fish and ecosystem needs in the Delta and connected systems elsewhere in the state;⁸ this too could be compiled. At the same time, statutory changes to clarify the rights of waterways to the water that science demonstrates they need can begin to be debated and eventually adopted. Along with this discussion should be a process for enforcing these ecosystem water rights; for instance, the rights can be held and enforced by independent legal guardians or trusts. The state should also develop a process for selecting and funding (*e.g.*, through fees on water diversion and use) such independent guardians and meeting program costs overall.

This process also must include pairing the above-identified legal water rights for ecosystems with identified water sources. Water rights that implement scientifically identified water needs could be accounted for through such strategies as: reviewing unexercised rights,

⁶ See, *e.g.*, NOAA/NMFS, “NMFS Biological and Conference Opinion on the Long-Term Operations of the Central Valley Project and State Water Project” (June 4, 2009), available at <http://swr.nmfs.noaa.gov/ocap.htm>. NMFS’ final Opinion concludes that the CVPSWP operations are, among other things, likely to jeopardize the continued existence of federally listed endangered Sacramento River winter-run Chinook salmon, threatened Central Valley spring-run Chinook salmon, threatened Central Valley steelhead, and even federally listed Southern Resident killer whales.

⁷ SWRCB, “Development of Flow Criteria for the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta Ecosystem,” (Aug. 3, 2010), at: http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/waterrights/water_issues/programs/bay_delta/deltaflow/docs/final_rpt080310.pdf.

⁸ See, *e.g.*, Ocean Protection Council instream flow analyses at: <http://www.opc.ca.gov/category/projectsbytopic/>, and DFG instream flow reports at: http://www.dfg.ca.gov/water/instream_flow_docs.html.

No comments

- n/a -

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making “waste and unreasonable use” determinations, conducting adjudications, working with the federal government regarding effective allocation of federal water rights, assessing rights and sources associated with “new” water, raising fees on diversions to encourage voluntary release of unneeded rights, as well as other approaches. Given the significant over-allocation of water rights in the state on paper, and the unknown amount of water diverted under riparian and pre-1914 rights, this task may be complex and take some time. It is not, however, insurmountable in light of the numerous existing legal tools that the state could use if it chooses to plan wisely, rather than continue to react to the courts as the effective arbiters of the state’s water policies. Further, the time frame of the Delta Plan is more than sufficient to allow this necessary exercise to begin, complete, and achieve positive results in protecting the health of the Delta through the force of law.

OR96-6

In summary, formalizing and effectuating water rights for ecosystems will ensure that waterway needs are considered up front, that planning is effective and certain, that implementation and enforcement is clear, and that water is shared in a way that ensures that the needs of the state and its ecosystems are met. The DEIR’s failure to include any discussion of this essential legal balancing effort, which is necessary to meet the state’s minimum co-equal goals mandate, renders the DEIR inadequate. Accordingly, we ask that the DEIR be revised to add to Alternative 2 the establishment of water rights for waterways as a tool to advance the well-being of the Delta, and the current and future Californians who depend on it. This strategy should be analyzed in a revised document, which should then be recirculated for further public comment.

OR96-7

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The Delta Plan is a *de facto* statewide plan with at least a 50-year time frame. It accordingly must reflect a statewide vision and commit to a necessary suite of actions whose time frames are commensurate with the sweep and importance of this Plan. “Water rights for waterways” is one such action that must be included in the Plan and its DEIR to ensure the DEIR’s compliance with CEQA, and the effectiveness of this critical initiative.

OR96-8

We look forward to working with the Council to safeguard California’s Delta and connected ecosystems and to ensure clean, abundant waters for the benefit of California’s people and natural world, now and in the future. Thank you.

Regards,



Linda Sheehan
Executive Director
Earth Law Center
lsheehan@earthlaw.org

Response to comment OR96-7

Please refer to response to comment OR96-3.

Response to comment OR96-8

Comment noted.