

# Viewpoints: Proposed tunnel would help protect Delta environment, water supply

Special to The Bee

Published Thursday, Feb. 10, 2011

The Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta plays a critical role in the economic health, safety and security of the world, as well as California and the United States.

Home to a diverse array of animal species, it also is the source of drinking water for two-thirds of Californians, serves as a lifeline to the state's agricultural industry (which contributes as much as 25 percent of the total U.S. food supply) and allows shipping traffic to flow to and from the Port of Stockton.

Failure of the region's earthen levees – many of which were built in the 1860s – due to an earthquake, major flood event or one too many animals burrowing one too many holes could be catastrophic. Recent events in Australia have reminded us of the overwhelming devastation floodwaters can cause to homes and businesses. Imagine the added impact of losing fresh water supplies from the Delta for at least a year and a half. That's how long the California Department of Water Resources estimates a severe levee failure could disrupt water exports.

Interrelated issues of seismic activity, soil subsidence, native species decline and the damaging potential of increased salinity have failed to generate agreement on how to adequately address these challenges.

It's safe to say the biggest roadblocks facing any potential solutions to the Delta's problems aren't related to engineering. We have the technical know-how. It's governance.

Breaking the stalemate will not be easy. Californians have been fighting about where water should go since the State Water Project began in the 1930s.

Passionate advocates on multiple fronts have long argued about what is more important, protecting and repairing the Delta's environment or creating a sustainable source of water for California's people and agricultural industry.

Such debates miss the point. They are two sides of the same coin. One cannot stand without the other.

Rather than simply waiting for calamity to strike, imagine what we could do if we better managed having too much water in wet years and too little in dry ones by safely storing the excess and delivering it for use when it's needed.

We must take a collaborative yet aggressive approach to saving the Delta. In 2009 state lawmakers took a step in the right direction with the passage of the Comprehensive Water Package. In addition to setting requirements for monitoring, managing and improving the Delta, it established that ensuring a reliable water supply and conserving the ecosystem are "co-equal goals."

Gov. Jerry Brown also has said we must maintain and enhance water supplies for all Californians and take action to restore the Delta.

In part, that shared goal will be best attained by moving forward with the dual conveyance tunnel and canal project. The proposed 43-mile-long tunnel, which would run under the Delta to south of San Francisco Bay, would better protect the environment and secure the state's fresh water supply. It will leave a smaller footprint than the east or west alignment proposals and is more economically feasible.

Advocates on all sides must work with federal, state and local officials to ensure the integrity of the Delta. That includes providing input and support to the Delta Stewardship Council as it develops and adopts a comprehensive resources management plan this year.

Additional education, public outreach and legislation will be required to get the job done in an affordable, timely way. At a time when public dollars are at a premium, all funding options should be on the table, including incentives for encouraging private investment.

Water from the Delta supports a diverse ecosystem, irrigates our crops and helps drive our industries and ship our goods. This fragile gem sustains Californians' health and well-being. We must sustain it.

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