

California officials delay massive Delta water tunnel project

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Plans for two huge water diversion tunnels in the Delta are being delayed, state officials announced Wednesday, because the plans need more work.

Nancy Vogel, spokeswoman for the [California Department of Water Resources](#), said the delay in the \$25 billion Bay Delta Conservation Plan was triggered by public comments submitted on the draft environmental impact report. The comments revealed that certain areas of the plan need additional study, although she could not yet say specifically what areas.

“We’re going through it and we’re going to revise and send it back out for public review,” Vogel said. “We continue to look for ways to reduce the impacts to Delta residents and landowners, and we’ll have a lot more information in six to eight weeks.”

Officials said the revised document will be re-released for public comment “in early 2015.” They originally intended to approve the current plan near the start of the new year. Together with more time for public comment on the revised document, the delay will amount to several months.

The Bay Delta Conservation Plan has been in the works for more than seven years. It focuses on the [Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta](#), where water is diverted to serve 25 million Californians and 3 million acres of farmland. The plan aims to stabilize water diversions and repair ecological health in the estuary, the largest on the West Coast of the Americas.

The most controversial element of the plan is a massive pair of tunnels, 40 feet in diameter and 30 miles long, that would divert a portion of the Sacramento River’s flow at three intakes proposed near Courtland, routing the water to existing diversion pumps near Tracy. The goal is to avoid reverse flows in the estuary caused by the current diversion pumps, which are one cause of ecological trouble in the Delta. The new intakes would also have modern fish screens, whereas the current intakes near Tracy do not.

Critics warn that the new intakes could simply move the harm to endangered fish species to a different part of the estuary. They also say the disruption from such a massive construction project will transform the Delta permanently, potentially jeopardizing its agricultural economy.

“It was inevitable that they would have to restart their efforts,” said Jonas Minton, a water policy adviser at the [Planning and Conservation League](#) in Sacramento. “The problem is that they cannot justify the project based on adverse impacts that their own work has already identified.”

Water agencies that stand to benefit from the project have already spent about \$250 million on the planning effort. Those agencies include the [Metropolitan Water District](#) of Southern California and [Westlands Water District](#), a major agricultural water supplier in the [San Joaquin Valley](#). That initial round of planning funds, paid to DWR, is almost gone.

“We’ve got the funds to pay for a recirculation of the documents,” Vogel said. “We may need to go back to the public water agencies in early 2015 for additional funds, depending on the scope of the recirculation.”

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