

EDITORIAL: Prop. 1 would help restore the delta, too



Delta restoration is included in the Proposition 1 water bond on the Nov. 4 ballot. A healthy delta is vital to California. This is a view of the northern end of Bradford Island that borders the San Joaquin River.

MANNY CRISOSOTOMO — Sacramento Bee file photo

Restoring the ecological health of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta is critical to California's water system. It's also another reason why voters should approve Proposition 1, the \$7.5 billion water bond on the November ballot.

More than \$137 million would be earmarked for habitat restoration in the delta. Another \$295 million would be spent on levee improvements. The bond also would fund projects statewide for clean drinking water, recycling and groundwater cleanup, all in serious need of attention as California heads into the fourth year of severe drought. And the bond provides for \$2.7 billion for additional water storage — potentially a big plus for the San Joaquin Valley.

Almost every expert agrees that improving delta habitat is crucial to preserving endangered species. That, in turn, will affect water transfers south. But questions need to be answered about how much habitat should be restored and where that work should take place.

Part of the answer can be found on the delta's western edge. Native plants grow from a berm and small channel along a 3,000-foot stretch of levee that protects Twitchell Island from being inundated by the San Joaquin River. The thin stretch of trees, shrub, grass and tule appear out of place next to the levee, which is fortified by large rocks.

The channel and vegetation are part of a restoration effort intended to enhance the chances that young salmon will survive their journey to the Pacific Ocean. Making this type of habitat is not cheap, nor easy. It cost about \$1,000 per lineal foot or about \$3 million for the stretch along Twitchell levee.

The setback levee is one of many different efforts to restore lost habitat. With more natural habitat, salmon and other fish should rebound. With healthy salmon runs and more delta smelt, pumping water from the south delta to the Valley and Southern California could become more reliable.

How to achieve these goals is a point of debate among farmers, people who fish, environmentalists, water contractors and government officials.

To create more habitat like the setback levee, some farmland would need to be taken out of production, a prospect that many farmers oppose. They say habitat restoration should be done on public land or land held in trust by environmental groups.

Environmental groups counter that parts of some delta islands are not ideal farmland and could be returned to aquatic habitat.

Farmers also question whether the delta is the right place for habitat restoration, saying improving habitat farther upstream where salmon spawn would make more sense.

Environmentalists want to experiment with different types of restoration in the delta and upstream.

The Nature Conservancy and other groups, for example, are restoring more than 800 acres, in the Cosumnes River Preserve in southern Sacramento County. By removing portions of private levees along the Cosumnes, the project will reconnect the river to its natural floodplain with the goal of creating more habitat for fish and birds, reducing flood risk and recharging groundwater.

The project, scheduled to be completed soon, has been in the works for more than a decade, with 10 different agencies breaching the levees at a cost of more than \$2.5 million.

Researchers plan to evaluate direct and indirect benefits to provide better information on restoration projects. With the declining health of the delta, worthy restoration projects should be speeded up and the process streamlined.

Earlier this year, the debate over habitat restoration had been clouded by Gov. Jerry Brown's proposal to build 35-mile-long twin tunnels through the delta. Opponents of the tunnels made sure to separate it by stripping more than \$1 billion for the delta from the bond.

Still, the trimmed down bond on the Nov. 4 ballot will be good for salmon and other endangered species, for water quality and ultimately for the region and state. Setting aside concerns about the Bay Delta Conservation Plan and the possibility of twin tunnels, habitat restoration is necessary now to improve the delta's health.

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