

## EDITORIAL: Restoring delta must be part of tunnels plan



The Bay Delta plan proposes twin tunnels to transfer water from the Sacramento River near Clarksburg to the Clifton Court Forebay, above, near Tracy.

RICH PEDRONCELLI — Associated Press file

As Gov. Jerry Brown tries to salvage the \$25 billion project to build twin tunnels through the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, he should keep in mind that it won't be acceptable to give up its environmental goals.

His new tack is understandable; federal agencies have signaled that they probably won't issue the 50-year environmental permits that were a key element of the old plan. But if he wants to persuade the public that his approach won't degenerate into a water grab for Southern California and the Central Valley, he has to show resolve.

The Bay Delta Conservation Plan was proposed with two equal goals: reliably supply Southern Californians and Central Valley farmers with water, and restore the delta ecosystem to save endangered species, such as salmon and delta smelt.

The proposition was that two 30-mile-long tunnels, built under the delta, would do a better job of moving water from north to south, and mitigate the damage from pumps that kill fish. Meanwhile, habitat was to be restored via a 50-year plan for conservation. Water agencies would help pick up the tab, because, with the restoration in progress, the variable flow they get now — tightened by federal agencies and courts any time an endangered fish appears to be threatened — would be less prone to interruption.

Now Brown is expected to propose that those goals be uncoupled because the state hasn't been able to convince federal biologists that its plan will restore the fish and wildlife that are struggling for survival. And if the biologists are

unconvinced, the feds won't issue the 50-year permits.

When the new plan is offered, the governor should make clear that the water supply and environmental goals are still paramount and co-equal; otherwise, Northern California and the water districts may balk.

We hope the Brown administration recognizes that concern. Restoring the delta has been a critical selling point to many Northern Californians, who helped defeat a 1982 plan to build a peripheral canal there. Water agencies also need to see that the new plan will be worth their while.

The Brown administration says it is deeply committed to the co-equal goals, but separating the twin tunnels from habitat restoration would create a path to successfully implement the project.

In talks over the new plan, state officials say they want to speed up habitat restoration before construction of the tunnels and broaden it beyond the 100,000 acres in the delta to include Sierra watersheds. Habitat projects could start soon, if the state didn't have to wait on permitting for the twin tunnels.

But how it would work is under discussion. And it's unclear how the \$8 billion earmarked for restoration figures into the new plan, when it would be spent and how that money would be appropriated.

Federal authorities have severely criticized the Bay Delta Conservation Plan, which would draw water from the Sacramento River just south of the city and pipe it to the southern end of the delta.

In a review last year, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said the plan would harm water quality and aquatic life, and increase pollution. The EPA recommended an alternative plan be developed to allow for "greater freshwater flows through the Delta." The National Marine Fisheries Service questioned whether the plan would help fish populations recover.

Also, scientific analyses have been unable to predict the health of the delta in the next 50 years, with variables of climate change, sea level rise and seismic activity. As some fish populations drop to dangerous levels, assessing the delta's future has proven to be nearly impossible. But by shortening the time frame from 50 years to 10 years, analyzing the tunnels' impact would be easier to foresee.

The delta's fragile ecological health is clear; we don't need to parse its declining state with more studies. But a focused, coordinated approach to restore habitat to help endangered and threatened species recover should be part of the governor's new plan.

If technically separating the coequal goals allows habitat restoration to begin sooner rather than later, that might reassure the public. So would some metrics. In developing the new delta plan, the governor should specifically define the ecological goals, set measurable objectives for recovery of species, produce a coordinated action plan and strictly monitor its progress.

The goal of the twin tunnels is clear — a reliable supply of water. The co-equal goal of restoring the delta has become murky. It should be a non-starter to proceed with the tunnels and expect environmental restoration to come at some later date.