

Jerry Brown to revise plan for twin water tunnels in Delta

By David Siders
dsiders@sacbee.com

In a bid to reinvigorate his beleaguered, \$25 billion twin-tunnels project, Gov. Jerry Brown is expected to release a revised water diversion plan Thursday, likely with reduced habitat restoration.

The revised plan calls for restoring less than one-third of the 100,000 acres of wetland and wildlife habitat originally planned, California Department of Fish and Wildlife Director Chuck Bonham told the Associated Press on Wednesday.

The news agency said the new cost of habitat restoration would amount to about \$300 million, a fraction of the \$8 billion originally projected. State and federal officials were scheduled to hold a news conference in Oakland on Thursday to discuss the revised plan.

Brown confirmed in April that he would no longer seek a difficult, 50-year permit for the project, after federal agencies balked at permit approvals. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said last year that the project could violate the federal Clean Water Act and harm endangered fish.

The long-term permit was considered significant to major water users who, after paying for the tunnels' construction, could rely on pumping standards that could not be easily changed for decades.

The project, known as the Bay Delta Conservation Plan, calls for the construction of two tunnels, 40 feet in diameter and 30 miles long, to draw water from the Sacramento River to state and federal diversion canals near Tracy, which distribute water across the state.

The Brown administration has promoted the project as necessary to stabilize water deliveries relied upon by millions of Californians, while also restoring a damaged Delta ecosystem.

Demand for water from the Delta has historically contributed to declining conditions in the estuary, including for Delta smelt. The Brown administration has argued the project could avoid harmful reverse water flows caused by existing diversion pumps.

Decoupling the project from a broader restoration effort is likely to reinvigorate critics of the project, who have long argued it would harm the fragile Delta. Restore the Delta, a group opposed of Brown's plan to build the tunnels, said decoupling restoration and project construction efforts would de-emphasize environmental concerns.

"For eight years, Californians had been told that the Bay Delta Conservation Plan (BDCP) was going to serve what became law in 2009 – the co-equal goals of restoring the Delta and providing water supply reliability," the group's executive director, Barbara Barrigan-Parrilla, said in a prepared statement several weeks ago, when changes were first expected. "Proponents of the BDCP are lamenting that, after 8 years and \$240,000,000, they do not have a viable project. Even proponents now admit the BDCP was supposed to do something better, but it does not meet the 'better' standard."

Last year, the EPA warned the tunnels' diversion of water was likely to increase concentrations of salinity, mercury and pesticides in the estuary, a source of freshwater for 25 million Californians and 3 million acres of farmland.

Brown has made the tunnels project a priority of his final term, having promoted a similar project – ultimately unsuccessfully – when he was governor before from 1975 to 1983.

Brown, addressing reporters in Colusa County in April, described the change to the project as a “technical point.”

“To get a 50-year permit would set the ground rules for 50 years, and some environmentalists were worried (about) what happens in 30 years if the scientific predictions turn out to be wrong,” he said at the time. “Now we’re getting a permit in a way that will allow subsequent developments to dictate whatever the solutions that science would suggest.”

Call David Siders, Bee Capitol Bureau, (916) 321-1215. Follow him on Twitter [@davidsiders](https://twitter.com/davidsiders).