

Jerry Brown limits Delta restoration goals, while promising more

By the Editorial
Board

Gov. Jerry Brown's plan to fix California's complex plumbing system took yet another twist Thursday.

This time, he [proposed to scale back by more than a third](#) the number of acres that would be restored in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, while insisting that the new plan will help revive depleted fisheries and create a healthier environment.

Forgive the skepticism among those of us who count ourselves among the Delta's advocates. Sen. Lois Wolk, D-Davis, and some environmentalists were quick to denounce the effort as breaking the commitment to the long-held notion of coequal goals, that of restoring the Delta and establishing a reliable water supply.

They homed in on Brown's proposal to construct two hugely controversial and costly tunnels, 40 feet in diameter and 30 miles long, to move water from Northern California to farms and cities to the south. The \$25 billion twin tunnel project is problematic.

Even so, Brown's latest proposal does include important components.

In a telephone press conference organized by the Brown administration, state and federal authorities who are responsible for saving the Delta pledged to reverse what has been a decades-long decline in the Delta's ecological health. Those appointees say they will establish measurable objectives that will chart progress in restoring tragically depleted fisheries.

Brown administration aides didn't specify which restoration projects they might undertake, although they [issued a map depicting potential projects](#), including some in the Yolo Bypass.

Brown's top fisheries and water officials also said they will speed up restoration efforts, separating the environmental work from the plan to improve the state's dysfunctional method of pumping water from the southern end of the Delta.

Brown is placing one person [in charge of the Delta restoration](#), David Okita, who recently retired as a general manager of the Solano County Water Agency. Okita has significant experience in habitat restoration.

All of that is laudable.

In the past, however, the state proposed to restore 100,000 acres of Delta habitat at a cost of \$8 billion over 50 years. Now, the governor proposes to restore roughly 30,000 acres at a cost of \$300 million over a four-year period. On its face, that is a dramatic reduction.

It also could be a more pragmatic approach. An \$8 billion commitment would have required legislative and congressional approval, which was optimistic if not unrealistic. Federal authorities criticized the Bay Delta Conservation Plan last year, particularly the notion of a 50-year horizon, given uncertainties brought about by climate change.

"This is a step forward because it's a concrete action," Brown told reporters in Oakland. "It's real. It's happening in the real world. The other was more, it was a desire."

Brown has been working on water since he was governor the first time. Now, he is in the fifth year of his second stint as chief executive. Planning and discussion about the Delta and a conveyance has been interminable.

Thursday's announcement could turn out to be important. For now, however, it seems to be merely a start, one that has been a long time in coming.