

Editorial: Status quo in the Delta is untenable

By the Editorial Board

The lowly [Delta smelt is all but gone](#), numbering so few in a June survey of the Delta that California Department of Fish and Wildlife scientists had no choice but to place the species' population at zero.

Salmon that depend on a healthy Delta ecosystem are in danger of becoming extinct. Urban and suburban water users are under mandatory cutbacks. Valley farmers have lost a reliable supply of water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta and dig ever-deeper wells, causing other wells to dry up.

They've overdrafted groundwater by a million acre-feet a year, maybe more. No one knows for sure because no one knows with certainty whether there are 1 million or 2 million private wells in California.

California's most severe drought in history exacerbates it all. Even if [El Niño inundates California this winter](#), the underlying problem of an aging water system will persist. Something must be done; the status quo in the Delta is untenable.

Gov. Jerry Brown is offering a [revised twin tunnels project](#), a massive undertaking that includes 30-mile-long pipes, 40 feet in diameter, to divert water under the Delta.

His administration released the latest environmental analysis of and justification for the project, all 8,000 pages of it, on top of more than 30,000 pages from the first iteration.

Critics of any attempt to make water transfers more efficient or reliable to 26 million Californians south of the Delta denounce the governor's plan as a water grab. That claim is facile — and makes any consensus more difficult.

California [Department of Water Resources](#) Director Mark Cowin says the maximum amount of water that would be exported would be about 4.9 million acre-feet. That would be down from the average of roughly 5.2 million acre-feet transferred in recent years.

The twin tunnels may or may not be the solution to a problem that has vexed the state since before Brown's father was governor.

But Brown's legacy surely will include his environmentalist vision. Many of his closest advisers on water policy come from the environmental movement. He and his aides don't want to go down in history as officials who destroyed the environment so investor-farmers could grow more nuts, ranchers could rear more steers and developers could build more strip malls and cul-de-sacs.

The Legislature intends to hold oversight hearings next month. We hope the hearings elicit deeper understanding of the proposal, and don't degenerate into a re-enactment of the battles between those of us who live near rivers and people who live in transformed deserts.

State and federal scientists are vetting the latest version to determine whether the proposal meets the administration's coequal goals of providing reliable water supply and enhancing the ecosystem.

If the scientists approve permits that allow the construction, some Central Valley farmers and urban water users, who would pay for the tunnels, might calculate that the price, estimated at \$15 billion, is too high for the amount of water they would receive.

Southern California water authorities are not waiting for Godot. The San Diego Water Authority has built a

desalination plant. Orange County has a pioneering water recycling program. Los Angeles is bent on cleaning groundwater and capturing storm runoff.

Northern California residents are all too content to rely on rivers, or, in San Francisco's case, Hetch Hetchy reservoir in Yosemite National Park. Northern Californians should emulate Southern Californians' water conservation and innovation.

Brown's goal is to find a more efficient and reliable method of moving water from Northern California to Central Valley farms and Southern California. That is reasonable.

The tunnel project includes promises of fish screens and habitat restoration that are part of the package. That is vital.

If the tunnel proposal falters, the Delta will continue to be troubled. An earthquake could destroy levees, leading to salt water intrusion that would damage Delta farms and render water undrinkable. Water politics are such that Southern California and Central Valley interests would have little if any incentive to pay for habitat restoration without tunnels.

If the project proceeds, water exports cannot come at the expense of the environment, including the Delta smelt, a fragile creature that grows to a few inches, has a scent akin to a cucumber, and has a one-year life cycle. They have no commercial value. Given their depleted numbers, they haven't been a source of food for bigger fish in several seasons.

Insignificant though they may seem, the Delta smelt were here when the first humans arrived in California. They're all but gone from the wild because of the collective footprint of nearly 40 million people and an economy of \$2.3 trillion. Their demise is an indication that the entire Delta is imperiled.

A research partnership of the state and federal governments and [University of California keeps 30,000 Delta smelt alive](#) in tanks at the south end of the Delta, waiting for a time when habitat is restored and they can be released into the wild. The project is a testament to our collective desire to preserve one of God's creatures.

Clearly, the status quo is not working for the Delta smelt, or the Delta itself, or the farmers and urban users who depend on it.