

Environmental groups blast Delta twin-tunnels plan

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The surest way to improve the health of the fragile Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta is to increase the amount of fresh water flowing through it, yet government officials insist on pushing ahead with a twin-tunnels plan that would continue to funnel water from the troubled estuary.

So argues a group of environmentalists, Delta farmers and recreational anglers in a [letter sent Wednesday](#) to state and federal officials as part of the public comment on the project. The activists are challenging revised environmental impact documents released earlier this month as part of a controversial, \$15.5 billion plan to build two massive tunnels in the north Delta to ship the water to pumping stations in the south.

“The direct and obvious way to increase flows through the Delta is to take less water out,” the groups said in the 12-page complaint. Instead, the groups allege, boosters of the tunnels plan have deliberately refused to develop “any real alternatives at all” other than moving bone-dry irrigation districts and cities with junior water rights in Central and Southern California “to the front of the line” of the state’s water delivery system.

Nancy Vogel, a spokeswoman for the California Natural Resources Agency, said the group’s complaint would get reviewed along with the thousands of others filed as part of the public comment period, which officials announced would be extended to Oct. 30.

“In eight years of work on the Bay Delta Conservation Plan, dozens of different alternatives have been examined, including those that would involve reduced diversions from the Delta,” Vogel said in an email.

Known formally as the Bay Delta Conservation Plan, Gov. Jerry Brown’s administration recently renamed the tunnels project the California WaterFix.

The complaint calls on the state and federal agencies to reject the recently released environmental documents and start fresh with a new study that presents more options to restore the estuary’s habitat and protect imperiled Delta fish.

In a prepared statement, the groups called the 48,000 pages of environmental reports released so far as “conclusory Water Tunnels advocacy,” and the project “a huge water grab with some window dressing.”

The letter is signed by the Friends of the River, Restore the Delta, the Center for Biological Diversity, the California Water Impact Network, the California Sportfishing Protection Alliance and the Environmental Water Caucus.

Boosters of the tunnels plan, including Brown, have pitched it as serving two missions: It would help stabilize the environmentally fragile Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, and improve delivery to customers of the State Water Project and the federal Central Valley Project.

The project calls for construction of two 30-mile tunnels that would draw water from the Sacramento River near Courtland and deliver it to the pumps and government-operated canals near Tracy. From there, the water would be pumped, as it has for decades, to 25 million Southern Californians and 3 million acres of farmland.

Half of all the freshwater runoff in California travels through the Delta.

Officials say decades of pumping water south through the complex tidal ecosystem has harmed the Delta’s wildlife and habitat, driving some fish species to the brink of extinction.

Delta levees also have become vulnerable to a major earthquake, which could flood the Delta with ocean saltwater and force a halt to the pumping of fresh water south.

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