

Central Valley Business Times

Lawmakers urge governor to scrap his tunnels

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- Seven members of Congress make request
- “The ... costs appear to severely outweigh its benefits”



The governor would be wise to scrap his crusade to build massive water tunnels beneath the California Delta, say seven members of Congress, all Democrats.

The governor’s plan to build the multibillion-dollar twin tunnels fails to increase the water supply, will devastate an already fragile Delta ecosystem, and will divert money from more effective statewide water solutions for California, say the lawmakers in a letter to Gov. Edmund Brown Jr.

“In a time of severe drought, we need to conserve water and augment our water supply throughout the entire state. If the tunnels are constructed, not a single drop of new water will be added to California’s water supply,” they say in their letter to the governor.

The plan would have the tunnels suck fresh water out of the Sacramento River and ship it to buyers of water from the State Water Project and federal Central Valley Project. The tunnels are, essentially, an underground version of Mr. Brown’s ill-fated Peripheral Canal of the 1980s, rejected by California voters.

The tunnels would take thousands of acres of farmland out of production in the Delta area and potentially impair properties around the region through eminent domain,” the letter continues. “Other negative impacts of the proposed tunnels plan include the depletion of essential freshwater from the Delta estuary and groundwater supplies; and the degradation of water quality for farmers, cities, and wildlife, including further saltwater intrusion.”

How much the tunnels might cost has not been answered definitively. One independent estimate of the original concept, which then included environmental mitigation, put the price at about \$68 billion, including the interest on the money borrowed to burrow the tunnels.

The tunnels plans’ environmental documents show that “building the tunnels will yield less than 200,000 acre-feet of water annually for Central Valley farmers. These farmers will be responsible for the project’s estimated cost of \$10 billion, or over \$150,000 per acre. Independent economists estimate the tunnels’ water yield will cost around \$3,000 per acre-foot.

“As a result, Central Valley farmers will pay a steep increase in costs without a real return in water, Delta farming operations could be severely disrupted, and Delta and Northern California communities will no longer be guaranteed substantial environmental restoration efforts,” they write.

“The ... costs appear to severely outweigh its benefits, while causing irreparable harm to Delta and Northern California communities who thus far have not been adequately included in project negotiations. We urge you to move away from the flawed ... tunnels plan and implement the cost-effective policy solutions already outlined in your

California Water Action Plan like conservation, recycling, increased efficiency, and storage that will ensure sustainable water supplies for a healthy Delta ecosystem and California's farmers and communities statewide," they say.

The letter is signed by Reps. Jerry McNerney; Mike Thompson; Jared Huffman, Ami Bera; John Garamendi; Mark DeSaulnier; and Doris Matsui.