

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

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Delta 'fix' plan hugely flawed vehicle meant to justify rerouting river water, U.S. panel says

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A high-profile plan to "fix" the Delta by spending more than \$13 billion for new aqueducts and ecosystem restoration is riddled with holes, flaws and inconsistencies, a prestigious panel of scientists concluded in a report released Thursday.

The Bay-Delta Conservation Plan, rather than setting out to strike a balance between water supplies and the environment, seems to promote a highly contested aqueduct to deliver water from the Sacramento River, the panel found. Such an aqueduct, whether a giant canal or big tunnels, is known as "isolated conveyance."

"The lack of an appropriate (planning) structure creates the impression that the entire effort is little more than a post hoc rationalization of a previously selected group of facilities, including an isolated conveyance facility," the scientists wrote.

The report, by the operating arm of the National Academy of Sciences, amounts to a blistering critique of how the plan stood at the end of Schwarzenegger administration, a period during which critics said some of the state's biggest users of Delta water -- the Westlands Water District, the Kern County Water Agency and the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California -- dominated planning.

In some ways, the criticism is unsurprising given that the panel was asked to review science used in the plan -- in development for five years at a cost of \$150 million -- without the key scientific analysis, called an effects analysis, that has

been mired in problems and remains unfinished.

"The panel felt that, given the time and expenditures, people could have reasonably expected to get a plan that was more complete than it is," said Henry Vaux, an economics professor emeritus at the University of California and chairman of the National Research Council review panel.

Speaking to media members, Vaux said the plan was fixable but it was unclear how much more work was needed.

"We feel that there's a solid beginning here," he said. "It's not clear how much farther we have to go."

The Bay Delta Conservation Plan started in 2006 as Delta water users sought to win approval of a canal to boost water deliveries while escaping tightening pumping restrictions put in place because of declines in endangered fish populations.

A key question, Vaux said, is whether the plan is meant to meet regulatory requirements for the aqueduct -- in which case it could be scientifically justified as long as all sides were willing to accept uncertainties in how it would be managed -- or whether it was meant to balance ecosystem needs with water supplies.

If the latter is the case -- and that is what the plan says and what key state and federal officials say -- then the plan was done backward with construction of a new aqueduct overemphasized and other ideas ignored, the report says.

The newer state and federal administrations of Gov. Jerry Brown and President Barack Obama are seeking



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they would be more inclusive of fishing groups and Delta landowners and governments excluded before.

No decision has been made on whether to build an aqueduct, and perhaps more importantly, how big it would be, said David Hayes, deputy secretary of the Interior.

"We are developing a full range of alternatives, as well as a proposed project," Hayes said during a conference call. "There has been no selection here."

The most recent versions of the plan would cost an estimated \$13 billion or more for ecosystem improvements and construction of large water-delivery tunnels from the Sacramento area to pump stations near Tracy.

Supporters say that an aqueduct from the Sacramento River is a logical way to reduce fish kills and dramatic flow alterations caused by pumping water from the south Delta.

But critics say less water should be taken from the Delta to protect ecosystems, salmon fisheries and water quality in the Contra Costa Water District and elsewhere. They also say that a large aqueduct like the one under consideration would lead to even more water diversions.

The report comes at a sensitive time. Despite the \$150 million spent on planning and studies, local water agencies in the Bay Area, San Joaquin Valley and Southern California need to come up with another \$100 million or so to complete the plan.

Some of those water agencies, and individual water officials, have voiced skepticism.

One of the plan's key backers said she did not think the report's criticism signaled anything water users did not already know.

Water boards from Silicon Valley to San Diego will not be asked for more money until a pending description of how a project might work is provided by state and federal agencies, said Laura King Moon, assistant general manager of State Water Contractors.

"We haven't geared up to go to the boards yet," King Moon said.

the research arm of the National Academy of Sciences, was put together to review the science underlying restrictions on Delta pumping at the urging of Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., who was responding to a request from farming magnate Stewart Resnick.

Thursday's report is an outgrowth of that work, prepared by a closely related council panel in response to a subsequent request by the Obama administration to review the science underlying the plan.

DELTA PLAN FAILINGS

A federal panel reviewing whether the Bay-Delta Conservation Plan balances competing environmental and water demands found that the proposal is flawed in the following ways:

The purpose: The plan concludes that a 45-mile tunnel should be built without analyzing how that would affect the Delta and without considering alternatives.

The need: It ignores decreasing demand for Delta water.

The balance: It purports to treat the environment and water supplies equally, but is a rationalization to build a tunnel.

The amount: Is unclear on how much water would be taken from the Delta.

The bay: Does not address how it might affect San Francisco Bay.

DELTA PLAN FAILINGS

A panel reviewing whether the Bay-Delta

environmental and water demands found that the proposal is flawed.

In general: The plan concludes that a 45-mile tunnel should be built without analyzing how that would affect the Delta or considering alternatives.

The need: It ignores the potential to reduce demand for Delta water by pursuing more efficient water use.

The balance: It purports to treat the environment and water supplies equally, but it is a rationalization to build a tunnel.

The amount: It's unclear on how much water would be taken from the Delta.

The bay: It does not address how it might affect San Francisco Bay.