

## *Facts and Myths*

# **The Truth About California's Water, the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, and the Proposed Peripheral Canal**

### **Background:**

The 1982 attempt to build a peripheral canal in California was decisively defeated as California voters overwhelmingly rejected an attempt to divert water from the Sacramento River around the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta (Delta) to Central and Southern California. The current and renewed attempt to construct a peripheral canal and thereby control two-thirds of California's water, is not, however, being brought before the public and is being initiated irrespective of public opinion.

Through a 2006 Executive Order, Governor Schwarzenegger formed the Delta Vision Blue Ribbon Task Force (Task Force) to study issues in the Delta and develop a plan to address the needs of the competing interests and propose potential solutions for resolving some of the Delta's most pressing challenges. In 2007, the Task Force's "Delta Vision" was completed and the following year (in 2008) the Task Force was dissolved following the submission of the Delta Vision Strategic Plan. With funding from the Packard Foundation, members of the Task Force created the Delta Vision Foundation (DVF) to ensure implementation of the Delta Vision Strategic Plan (Strategic Plan).

The DVF is currently working with various California State legislators to pass legislation which, if enacted, will guarantee implementation of its recommendations through regulation and statute. At least 17 bills focusing on diverse elements of the Strategic Plan were initiated by various legislators. Those bills are now being combined into five to six inclusive bills, which are intended to be fast-tracked to ensure passage this session. The initial legislative hearing will be July 7 at 10 a.m. at the Capitol, Room 4202.

Unfortunately, the Strategic Plan is deficient in a number of areas and not practicable enough to fulfill the levels of accuracy and reliability needed for an undertaking of such great consequence and magnitude. Further deliberation and research is needed to define and develop real solutions which are neither flawed, nor lacking in the substance needed to be effective and credible. Some of the questionable aspects and inconsistencies of the Strategic Plan and related issues are addressed below.

**Myth: A peripheral canal is in the best interest of all citizens of California and will protect public access to water.**

**Fact:** If the plans for a peripheral canal go through, water will be diverted to water districts in Central and Southern California, who will then control 66% of California's water and determine its recipients. Not only will the taxpayers finance this \$20 - \$30 billion project, but they will then be required to purchase the water they previously had common property rights to. In effect, what was once public domain water will now be privatized and citizens will be denied public access to that water.

**Myth: Building a peripheral canal will increase the amount of water in California and is the best solution for managing the Delta's ecosystems and water supply.**

**Fact:** California will always have the same amount of water irrespective of how the water is transported. A peripheral canal will not increase water supplies, but, by siphoning water from the Sacramento

River above the Delta, it will decrease the amount of fresh water entering the Delta thus escalating the environmental damage and further compromising the Delta's fragile ecosystems. Unfortunately, the Delta Vision Strategic Plan does not adequately address the fundamental issues of the quality or quantity of water in the Delta. While runoff from agriculture is routinely checked, sewage and other effluent from major cities, along with stormwater runoff from city landscapes and streets goes largely unrestrained. For instance, large and possibly detrimental amounts of ammonia are believed to be being dumped from Sacramento's wastewater treatment plant just above the Delta.

**Myth: Flooding parts of the Delta and turning it into salt-water wetlands will resolve the Delta's ecological crisis by "restoring the ecosystem" and saving the endangered fish species.**

**Fact:** The construction of a peripheral canal and subsequent diversion of much of the Sacramento River water around the Delta will cause increased infiltration of salt water into the fresh water and reduce access of fresh water for freshwater fish. This will significantly increase salinity in the Delta, which may adversely impact the Delta smelt populations. Diverting a majority of the Sacramento River water just below Sacramento will also adversely impact salmon, which rely on the Sacramento and American Rivers to successfully spawn and increase their population.

**Myth: There is minimal culture in the Delta, and that the Delta Vision Strategic Plan is needed to create and protect "Delta culture."**

**Fact:** Some of California's oldest families live in the Delta. Five families, including some seventh-generation farmers, have ancestors who settled in the Delta in the 1700's, long before California's Gold Rush put California on the map. Over 500,000 people live in the Delta and have developed a rich and prosperous \$2 billion agricultural economy, while successfully safeguarding the Delta's unique history and cultural treasures.

**Myth: California is in a severe drought.**

**Fact:** Much of California's precipitation for 2009 has been in the high 70% – 80% range and is not as grim as was originally predicted. While conservative water use is in order, California water availability should not be severely impacted due to the rainfall totals. Management of California's water during the past few years, however, has created a situation of reduced water access due to practices of severely draining major water reservoirs, leaving little, if any, reserves for drier years.

**Myth: Development of the Delta Vision Strategic Plan has been a transparent process and all the major impacted parties have had input in creating the proposed decisions of how to manage the diverse and varied Delta interests.**

**Fact:** Current Delta residents were largely left out of the decision-making process in planning for the Delta's future. While properties for many Delta residents are under threat of eminent domain and these Delta residents, who have the most to lose personally with the proposals of the Delta Vision Strategic Plan, have had limited opportunity for input, many peripheral canal stakeholders, including junior water rights holders such as Westlands Water District, have been given significant opportunity to participate in the planning process.