

San Francisco Chronicle

Voters will kill a peripheral canal

Bill Jennings

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We share The Chronicle's view that a peripheral canal is a bad idea, but we disagree that its construction is inevitable.

Gov. [Jerry Brown](#) and federal officials might be attempting to persuade the public that the canal is nearly a fait accompli, but water ratepayers and voters will reject it, just as voters did 30 years ago.

The fast-track path to a peripheral canal that Brown seeks will have to navigate the ballot box, Congress, the Legislature and the courts. It will require suspension of our environmental review statutes, the Endangered Species Act, the Clean Water Act and the California Water Code, as well as property rights, due process and, frankly, common sense. Voters will reject it in a referendum - as it was rejected last time. Similar legislation is needed this time around.

Facts and science will continue to throw up roadblocks to a canal.

California's water crisis exists because the state has over-promised, wasted and inequitably distributed scarce water resources. Any effective solution requires bringing rights to water into balance with available supplies, maximizing use of water to the greatest good for all and ensuring that the public's rights are protected. Here's why the project will fail:

-- It is predicated on paper water. That is, the legal right to divert water exceeds by four times, on average, the unimpaired flow into the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. The state has promised more water than it had in the wettest year on record. California's water wars are rooted in efforts by those entitled only to surplus water to jump ahead in line of those with more senior

water rights.

-- The estuary needs more water if it is to survive. There isn't enough water, never has been enough water, and with global warming further reducing existing supplies, there will not be enough water to meet promised deliveries and guard estuary health.

-- The finances don't work. The canal's capital and operation costs are now estimated at \$15.7 billion, not including debt costs, for a scheme that is likely to export less water.

-- It serves few. Two-thirds of delta exports serve corporate agriculture on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley, which accounts for less than 0.5 percent of California's economy and population. Only a third goes to urban areas that make up half the state's population and economy.

-- The water will be too expensive for farmers. And urban ratepayers will revolt if asked to subsidize corporate farmers.

-- There are cheaper ways to protect water supply. While one of the justifications for the canal is the threat of an interrupted water supply in the case of an earthquake or levee breach, studies have shown that 80 percent of the cost and all of the loss of life would occur within the delta. Raising and strengthening levees to withstand a quake can be accomplished for \$2 billion to \$4 billion.

-- Diverting Sacramento River water around the delta will make pollution worse. Increased pollution will further degrade fisheries and diminish the productivity of hundreds of thousands of acres of farmland.

There is water for both people and fish if it is efficiently and equitably used. But the estuary cannot survive the waste of subsidized water to grow subsidized crops in the desert.

Bill Jennings is an executive committee member of Restore the Delta.