

## EDITORIALS

# The end of the delta tunnels plan? We should hope so

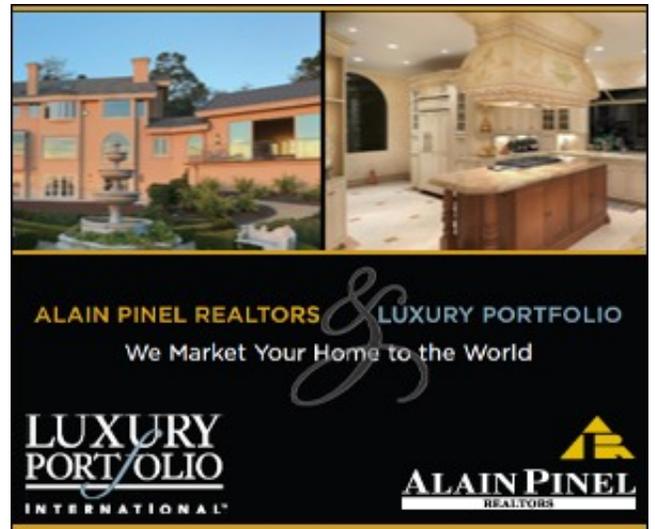
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A grand bargain to guarantee delta water deliveries to urban and agricultural users for 50 years — as long as they cover the cost of both environmental restoration and the mammoth twin-tunnels water project — appears to have fallen apart.

Gov. Jerry Brown's administration has simply concluded it cannot assure the water would be available. This development could affect both the scale of restoration work in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta — and the governor's plan for the twin tunnels.

So far, the State Water Contractors Association says it is waiting for more details from the governor. Those are expected next week. What we want to hear is how the state is prioritizing water for the environment and the San Francisco Bay-Delta estuary, not building tunnels to divert more of it to the south.



The governor's decision to decouple the habitat restoration work from the tunnels construction should guarantee that some work gets done in the delta and Sierra watersheds during the remainder of the governor's term, according to **Chuck Bonham**, who heads the state Department of Fish and Wildlife. The administration has the wetlands projects outlined in the **California Water Action Plan** and funds budgeted to accomplish them.

The governor originally sold the idea of the \$25 billion tunnels project, known as the Bay Delta Conservation Plan, as a way to increase the water supply for some 23 million Californians and 3 million acres of Central Valley farmlands and restore 100,000 acres of badly degraded delta habitat. The tunnels would take good-quality water from the north delta, move it along the eastern edge of the delta thus avoiding introducing salty water, and then dump it into the state aqueduct in the south. This plan, it was hoped, would allow the state to meet the legally required coequal goals of providing "a more reliable water supply and protecting, restoring and enhancing the delta ecosystem."

The tunnels plan rested on the premise that restored wetlands would help rebuild declining salmon populations by providing better habitat for baby fish to fatten before their long swim to the sea. Linking the construction project with the environmental work provided an incentive for the state water contractors to pay the full cost of the tunnels and about half of the \$8 billion in environmental restoration costs, because it offered some protection from lawsuits over endangered species laws and from federal rules that require reduced pumping to protect the fish. Environmental advocates were split: some praised the wetlands restoration but others worried the tunnel diversions would draw more saltwater into the delta, despoiling farmlands. Delta farmers also worried restoration efforts would take farmlands out of production and, eventually, them out of business.

The tunnels plan hit a dead end however when fish scientists could show correlation, but not causation, between wetlands restoration and improved fish health. Climate change also has cast doubt on water planning scenarios considered reliable only a few years ago. Federal fish agencies now see a 50-year permit as impossibly long. The state contractors are still in the game, but without a 50-year guarantee of water deliveries, they are weighing whether the plan still pencils out for them, said Jim Beck, general manager of the Kern County Water Agency.

California can no longer afford to dodge the expensive and politically difficult choices about how we use water. We can't look to magic bullets like tunnels to solve problems. Cities will have to commit to reducing water use, as Mayor Eric Garcetti did earlier this month when he released his plan to reduce Los Angeles' reliance on imported water by half over the next 20 years. The landscape will change as fields are fallowed.

The governor has it half-right with his decision to invest in environmental restoration. Now he just needs to deep-six those tunnels.

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