

Editorial: Boost water storage Contra Costa Times – 12/30/05

CALFED IS AT a crossroads. If it is to survive it must be reorganized in a way that allows it to make tough and necessary decisions without fear of upsetting any of the traditionally opposing water interests that make up CalFed.

The organization's vision of protecting the Delta and providing dependable supplies of water to agriculture and 23 million Californians is commendable. But CalFed has failed on many fronts. It did not accurately account for the money it spent, nor did it set specific goals that could be measured.

Far more important than the survival of CalFed is the preservation of the Delta and assuring adequate supplies of clean water to meet the demand of a growing population.

If CalFed is not up to the job, the state government must assume a greater role in making sure that California does not suffer a water shortage. There is no time to waste.

With a population that is growing by a half million a year and the diminished supply of available Colorado River water, California is going to have to act quickly to avoid a crisis that would make the electricity fiasco of a few years ago seem benign by comparison.

Whether one is addressing agriculture, commercial and residential growth, environmental protection or recreation, it is clear that greater dependable supplies of fresh water are essential. It should also be clear that the only way to meet that critical need is with significantly increased storage capacity.

California receives far more than enough water in rainy seasons and wet years to meet all the state's needs in dry seasons and even in extended droughts. However, the vast percentage of the rain and snow that fall on the state flows into the ocean. What this state desperately needs is more water storage, particularly in above-ground reservoirs, either by expanding current ones or building new ones.

Some of the state's needs can be met with increasing underground aquifers, better conservation efforts and perhaps new technology for desalinization. But all of these combined will not meet the state's growing needs.

Conservation and aquifers can help in the short run. But California must move ahead now on expanding and/or building new reservoirs. It takes many years of planning and construction to enlarge or build a new reservoir, which is why we need to act quickly.

Greater storage capacity not only will help meet demands for water from farms and urban areas, it will allow greater volumes of fresh water to be released into the Delta in dry seasons and droughts to maintain an ecological balance.

If new or larger reservoirs are not in place or at least on the way to completion before Southern California runs short of water, there will be massive political pressure to build a peripheral canal around the Delta to send water southward.

Southern California, with about two-thirds of the state's population and representation in the Legislature, has the political clout to get what it wants.

It would be a lot more difficult to block a peripheral canal now than it was in 1982, when it was defeated by an overwhelming negative vote from Northern California.

Those opposed to building or expanding reservoirs should consider the likely alternative of a canal bypassing the Delta. That could end up being an environmental disaster, even if water flows into the Delta were stipulated. Such "guarantees" have a way of dissipating under the pressure of a severe water shortage. California has not built a major new reservoir in more than a quarter century. That has been an inexcusable mistake that needs to be corrected to protect the Delta ecosystem and the state's economy. #