

Bruce Babbitt Calls for More Dams To Cope with Global Warming's Effects

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SACRAMENTO — California should build more dams and reconsider building a highly controversial peripheral canal, a key architect of the state's decade-old Delta water plan said Thursday.

Bruce Babbitt, who served as Interior Secretary during the Clinton administration, said the state has to worry not only about an aging infrastructure and a growing population, but also the fact that the state's water supplies will be sorely stretched by the effects of global warming.

"It is no longer a theory," Babbitt said in testimony to the Little Hoover Commission watchdog agency in Sacramento. "It is no longer a probability. The effects of global warming are upon us, and they are going to have a major impact on water management in California."

New reservoirs will be needed to offset the loss of snowpack, he said.

And rising sea levels will push saltwater further into the Delta, fouling drinking water for 23 million Californians who get at least some of their water from pumps in the south Delta. That problem could be addressed by a peripheral canal, which would divert water from the Sacramento River and shunt it to Southern California in a way that bypasses the Delta.

"It may have major positive results," said Babbitt, who called water management "the most important issue in this century in this state."

The remarks from Babbitt, a former government official with a reputation for being a strong environmentalist, were especially noteworthy in that they amounted to an endorsement of two of California environmentalists' most loathed proposals: new dams and a peripheral canal, which was scrapped in 1982.

His comments came during the first in a series of hearings before the Little Hoover Commission meant to determine whether the governing bodies that oversee the Delta-based water program known as CalFed should be restructured.

Former Gov. Pete Wilson also testified, saying the effort has fallen way behind expectations and that its bureaucracy has stifled progress.

"Today, CalFed appears to be losing ground," Wilson said. "It is nowhere close to preparing us for the next drought."

Crafted under Wilson and Babbitt during the severe drought of the late 1980s and 1990s, CalFed was meant to address crashing salmon and other fish stocks while also stabilizing

water supplies from the Delta, the source of about 25 percent of the water used in the state.

In recent months, the effort has fallen into its deepest crisis. It is beginning to run out of state bond funds that have kept it afloat in the absence of money expected from the state Legislature and Congress.

Many of its goals have fallen behind schedule, and this year scientists confirmed that for unexplained reasons fish and zooplankton populations are declining severely in the heart of the Delta.

Top CalFed officials in recent months have resigned or been reassigned.

"There's been this unfortunate collision of many problems on the horizon, and the transition from planning to implementation (of those plans,)" said Jason Peltier, the deputy assistant secretary for water and science and the Bush Administration's key liaison to CalFed. "Some controversial issues on top of that resulted to where we have numerous re-evaluations going on."

In addition to the Little Hoover Commission review, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has asked for an audit of the \$3 billion spent since 2000.

Yet most decisionmakers remain convinced CalFed is a good idea that has had successes. Some salmon runs, for example, have improved dramatically since the program was started.

CalFed also became a forum for more than two dozen state and federal agencies with authority over Delta water issues to coordinate efforts.

And by involving environmentalists, farm districts and urban water agencies, it seeks to avoid potentially damaging lawsuits, whether from environmentalists seeking better protection for fish or water districts seeking more water.

In that respect, it has done well.

But the success of its ambitious long-term plan signed in 2000 has been mixed.

The first phase of that plan is scheduled to end in 2007, and with money running out it is uncertain if many of the promises in that \$8 billion first phase can be fulfilled.

Members of the Little Hoover Commission were confused and frustrated Thursday after wading into the Byzantine world of California water.

Referring to an estimated \$1 billion remaining in CalFed bond funds, commissioner Stanley R. Zax at one point said, "I would recommend to the governor that they not spend a penny of that until somebody understands what's going on."

At another point, commissioner Welton C. Mansfield said, "I have no concept in my mind as to who is running this ship. I don't get it."

CalFed's problems began building to a head last December, when state Sen. Michael Machado, D- Linden, accused the agency that oversees CalFed -- the California Bay-Delta Authority -- of potentially wasting money by failing to plan for the fact that it would never be able to get all the money anticipated.

Environmentalists and water agencies became increasingly concerned their most favored programs, including ecosystem projects, water quality improvements, new dams, levee improvements or others, might not come to fruition.

In turn, that led to heightened tensions and the increasing likelihood that some interests might abandon the cooperation of CalFed and head back to court.