



Newsom administration releases draft EIR to modernize Delta Conveyance



On July 27, the Newsom administration released draft environmental documents detailing its proposal to modernize the conveyance system in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta for the State Water Project. The milestone represents an important opportunity for the interested public to review and comment on the proposal.

With the existing State Water Project intakes in the southern Delta, adding intakes in the northern reach of the estuary and transporting that supply has been proposed in various forms over the decades. This proposal, at less than a third of the capacity of the so-called Peripheral Canal of the 1980s, advances a unique route that avoids the central Delta and reduces impacts to Delta communities and wildlife.

“Two out of three Californians rely on the State Water Project for all or part of their water supply,” said DWR Director Karla Nemeth. “Modernizing this infrastructure is essential to adapting to a future that includes more frequent extremes of drought and flood, and greater water instability.”

Traditionally the State Water Project has provided about 30 percent of Southern California’s water, with wet years in Northern California providing vital reserves to withstand dry cycles. The project’s ability to meet its mission is challenged by a changing climate displaying longer dry cycles and more dramatic swings between wet and dry moments. Adding new northern intakes to the system and constructing the single-tunnel conveyance is intended to more reliably capture stormwater moments in the Delta while meeting environmental and water quality regulations.

The preferred alternative advanced in the draft environmental report is unlike any proposal that has preceded it. The two northern intake locations near the community of Hood are at locations proposed previously. But then the route heads to the east. The single tunnel, with a capacity of 6,000 cubic feet per second, largely stays near highways and interstates until tying directly into the California Aqueduct at the existing Bethany Reservoir. This route avoids the Central Delta and the existing intakes and forebay complex in the southern Delta, which is at an elevation of 3 feet above average sea level.

“We took a fresh look at everything. Changing from two tunnels to one opened the door to many creative design and engineering innovations,” Nemeth said.



That fresh look has yielded a project with fewer impacts and a smaller footprint. For example, the number of tunnel installment shafts has been reduced from six to two from a previous two-tunnel proposal. Construction traffic will be concentrated on specific routes and dedicated haul roads. Most conduit to power the tunnel boring machines will be buried. And the project proposes a community benefits program to directly fund new initiatives within the Delta. This program's framework is detailed in the draft environmental documents, while its final size, scope, and governance remain under discussion.

The proposed operations call for maximizing the existing southern intakes and utilizing the new northern intakes in higher flow moments. This method of operations is intended to help address water quality issues relating to shifting diversions.

Had the project been in operation over the past year, as one example, the state estimates that the new system could have captured more than 235,000 acre-feet of water, primarily during wet moments in the Delta in October and December-January. That is roughly equivalent to enough water to sustain 2.5 million Californians for a year.

The proposed project and operations do not represent final decisions. The state is seeking the public's input through a 90-day comment process that will include virtual meetings. Key permit processes lie ahead, such as securing compliance with the state and federal Endangered Species acts, a new diversion permit with the State Water Resources Control Board, and Delta Plan consistency via the Delta Stewardship Council.

For more information on the proposal as well as public comment opportunities, visit the project's website at www.deltaconveyanceproject.com.