

As [I pointed out](#) three months ago, the federal government has awakened from its 8-year Bush administration slumber to notice that the SF Bay-Delta is an important environmental and economic resource whose management requires federal input. On December 22, the Obama administration issued an [Interim Federal Action Plan for the California Bay-Delta](#).

The best news about the plan is simply that it was issued. It's one more sign that the feds are serious about joining in the task of dealing with the Bay-Delta's collapsing ecosystem and navigating the tricky intersections of water supply and environmental protection. That's essential to any progress. Federal agencies are key players both on the water management side (the Bureau of Reclamation operates the Central Valley Project) and on the regulatory side (the Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service implement the federal Endangered Species Act, and EPA oversees state implementation of the Clean Water Act), and of course any federal funding is a major plus for cash-strapped California.

Beyond that, I have mixed reactions. Substantively, I agree with Bill Jennings of the California Sportfishing Alliance, who [told the Sacramento Bee](#) that there's not much new here. It's a fairly complete summary of federal activities already underway, rather than a creative look at what else might be done. There are some important positives, but for me they are outweighed by some serious negatives.

The positives are real, but for the most part simply mark a return to where we were in the early CalFed days. For starters, the plan emphasizes the importance of coordination both between federal and state agencies and within the federal government. That shouldn't be a big deal, but in light of the Bush administration's active avoidance of any Bay-Delta entanglements, it gets cheers.

The plan also takes a broad view of the Delta ecosystem, acknowledging not only that there are a number of threats to the Delta in addition to pumping, but more importantly that there are a variety of federal regulatory and incentive programs that could be brought to bear. EPA, for example, is finally consulting with FWS and NMFS on the impacts of pesticide registrations on endangered species, and the USDA will look at using its various farm bill incentive authorities to promote both conservation and water use efficiency in the region. On the science side, the plan commits the US Geological Survey to a specific field study of whether Delta smelt move with turbid waters. I don't have any basis for evaluating the significance of that particular study, but it's very good to see USGS, which is a top research unit, being drawn directly into answering management-relevant questions. Again, that's

not new — it happened in the heyday of the CalFed Science Program — but it's great to get back to that point.

Still, I found much of the plan disappointing. In part, my reaction could be a function of the plan's interim nature. It may be unfair to expect a truly creative document at this stage, when the feds are just getting back in the game (although it's entirely fair to ask why it's taken eleven months for this administration to start thinking about putting its stamp on Bay-Delta policy).

But the plan has sins of commission as well as of omission. It continues the longstanding traditions of expecting too much of science and of promoting no-lose solutions.

Of course we need science-based decisionmaking in the Delta (and elsewhere). But here's how the plan describes the role of science:

Promoting high-quality science will help ensure that decisions are not made on the basis of incomplete or speculative scientific analysis, which can lead to continued stakeholder conflict rather than sustainable science-based solutions.

That sounds good, but there are two problems with it.

First, decisions about the Delta, like many other resource management decisions, must almost always be made on the basis of "incomplete . . . scientific analysis." We simply don't know as much about the Delta ecosystem as we would like to know, but we can't help but make management decisions. It's important to recognize that continuing the status quo of high water deliveries (and collapsing ecosystems) is itself a management decision made on the basis of incomplete (perhaps even speculative) information. Given that water users are already challenging the Biological Opinions for failure to demonstrate that water restrictions will actually save the smelt and salmon, it's troubling to see the administration buy into the attitude that science has nothing to say to managers unless the information is complete and conclusive.

Second, it suggests that the lack of stakeholder conflict is itself a measure of success. But if we've learned anything from Delta management over the last decade or so, it's that consensus solutions aren't always possible and the quixotic

search for them can get in the way of finding legitimate mechanisms for making trade-offs.

In other ways, this plan perpetuates the hope, that environmental protection can be had without any real cost to water deliveries. Notably, it endorses a smelt hatchery (under the rubric of a “Bay Delta Center for Collaborative Science and Restoration Propagation of Native Imperiled Aquatic Species”). Perhaps the Delta smelt really is in such desperate straits that it needs an injection of artificially-propagated fish. But its clear that the politicians who have been calling for a smelt hatchery have something else in mind — continual artificial production of a fish that isn’t even harvested, simply so that no one needs to worry about how many are killed in the pumps (or by other insults to the ecosystem).

Similarly, the plan emphasizes federal disaster relief over planning for a limited water supply. It contains a section with the somewhat promising heading “Deliver Agricultural Drought Relief Services and Provide Farmers and Ranchers the Tools to Better Manage for Drought,” but what follows is entirely about drought relief rather than about developing less water intensive crops or cropping systems. Why not consider some demonstration programs, perhaps accompanied by federally-provided crop insurance to help assure farmers that they need not risk great economic losses to experiment?

To sum up — it’s great to see the feds back in the game. It would be even better if they would get beyond where they were ten years ago.