

# San Francisco Chronicle

## Delta plan lacks goal, options, panel says

Draft outline called crude justification for pipeline

By Kelly Zito

CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

A widely watched plan for the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta that purports to both revive collapsing fish species and ensure stable water supplies instead reads as a crude justification for a controversial 40-mile pipeline around the estuary, a panel of pre-eminent scientists convened by the Obama administration said Thursday.

What's more, after four years and \$150 million, the draft plan has failed to define basic goals or analyze the potential impacts on the sensitive and failing ecosystem at the core of California's water system, according to the National Research Council, the research arm of the influential National Academy of Sciences.

The so-called Bay Delta Conservation Plan, the result of a collaboration of state, federal and

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# U.S. panel blasts delta plan over missing elements

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local water agencies, is supposed to be a blueprint for the future of the delta, and its recommendations on building a peripheral canal or other water conveyance system are expected to be adopted by the state.

On Thursday, however, an esteemed group of biologists, engineers, hydrologists and legal scholars scolded the collaborators for their lack of scientific rigor and accused them of steering the outcome toward a contentious canal. California voters rejected a similar proposal in 1982, calling it a blatant water grab of Northern California's waters by Southern California interests.

"This report has already selected an alternative — a tunnel," said panel chairman Henry Vaux, professor emeritus of resource economics at the University of California at Berkeley and Riverside. "And yet in places it claims to be a two-objective plan."

## Gauging scientific progress

The 81-page critique was written at the behest of the U.S. Department of Interior and U.S. Department of Commerce to assess the scientific progress on the Bay Delta Conservation Plan. In their review, the council concluded that some portions of the plan's data analysis were sound.

Overall, however, they deemed the plan disjointed,

unclear and incomplete, omitting key information on the amount of delta water to be diverted, for example, climate change projections and the delta's connection to San Francisco Bay.

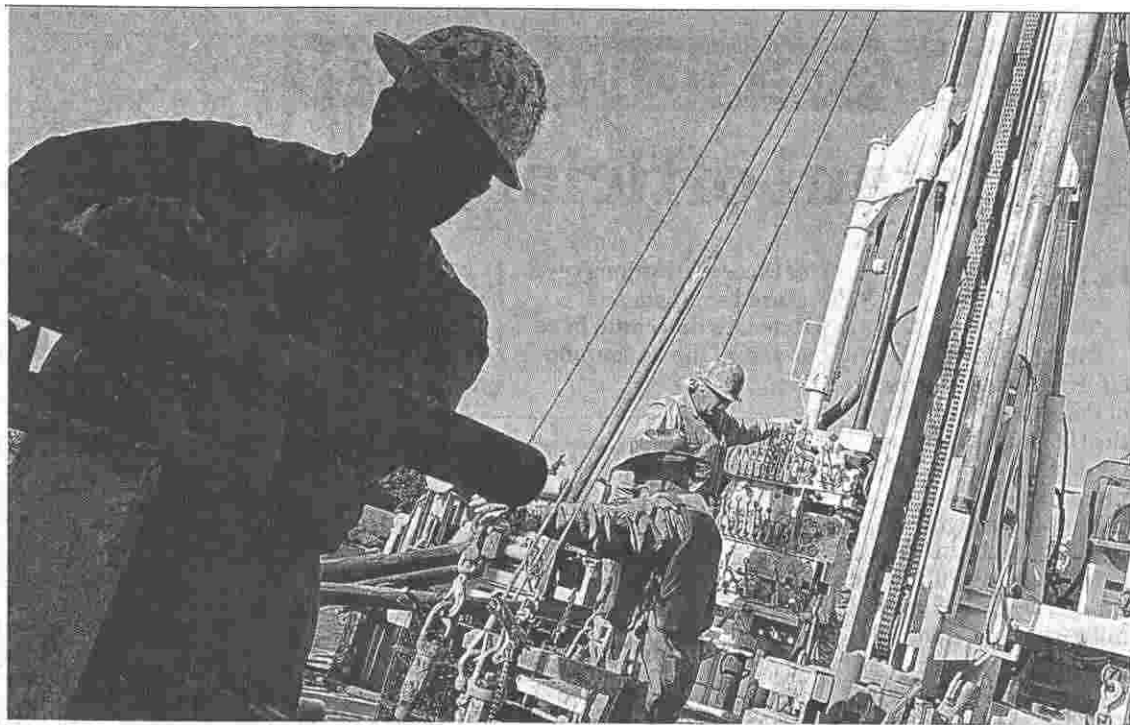
## Applying pressure

The high-level criticism of the plan isn't likely to derail it. But many experts believe the National Research Council's scrutiny will put pressure on the plan's collaborators to craft a more comprehensive and technical roadmap for the linchpin of California's water supply and a place that one teemed with native fish and fowl.

"It's very important that the public has a high level of confidence in this plan given what's at stake here — a high level of expense and the most important estuary on the West Coast," said Cynthia Koehler, California water legislative director for Environmental Defense Fund.

Most significantly, the national science group found that the plan lacks any discussion of possible alternatives to a giant canal or tunnel circumventing the delta. As envisioned, the multibillion dollar structure would siphon water from the Sacramento River at a rate of 15,000 cubic feet per second and send it around the central delta to pumps in the south.

Rather than begin by evaluating any number of alternatives, however, the plan itself



Luis Sinco / Los Angeles Times

**Workers with the California Water Resources Department drill for soil samples in the delta to gauge the feasibility of constructing tunnels that would transport water south.**

seems geared specifically toward building a canal or tunnel, with virtually no explanation of how it would impact the habitat, animals and water flows in the delta, the council said.

In one section, the council called it simply, "putting the cart before the horse."

#### **Downplaying a canal**

Immediately after the release of the academy's review Thursday, state and federal officials downplayed the bay delta plan's emphasis on a canal and stressed California's strong commitment to achieving both environmental restoration and water reliability. They also noted that the panel evaluated a 7-month-old version of a plan still two years away from completion. Since then, they said, analysis of other noncanal options has gotten under way.

"We are working on a full range of alternatives that will be subject to lots of public input and review," said Deputy

Interior Secretary David Hayes.

To skeptics of the tunnel — or "conveyance" in planning jargon — the stinging language in Thursday's report validated their concerns about a process they believe is firmly in the grip of a set of politically powerful and well-financed water agencies, including Westlands Water District, Metropolitan Water District of Southern California and the Santa Clara Valley Water District.

"This plan has been a very lengthy and impressive brochure for a conveyance," said Jon Rosenfield, biologist with the Bay Institute and a frequent critic of the lack of scientific analysis in the plan.

About 25 million residents and millions of acres of farmland in the Bay Area, Central Valley and Southern California rely on water from the estuary.

The proponents' argue a pipeline's benefits are twofold. It provides a continuous source of water to urban and rural

users and removes the huge intake pumps that entrain and kill young fish in the central delta. In theory, the pipeline would also let operators pull more water from the river to store in reservoirs during wet years.

#### **Strong correlation**

But opponents worry the gargantuan pipe would frequently shunt almost all of the Sacramento's vital freshwater away from the delta, allowing salty bay water to wash inland and further jeopardize vulnerable fish and plant life.

"The relationship between freshwater flows in the delta and the viability of fish populations is stronger than the correlation between smoking and cancer," said Rosenfield. For the conservation plan "to remain fuzzy on the amount of water they will divert is not OK."

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*E-mail Kelly Zito at [kzito@sfcchronicle.com](mailto:kzito@sfcchronicle.com).*