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THE VOICE OF THE WEST

EDITORIALS

A new water war

THE SACRAMENTO-San Joaquin River Delta is approaching its breaking point, and what may be California's biggest and most crucial water fight is about to heat up. How big is the crisis? Well, it's big enough that Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's administration has dared to hint at the need — and the bond money — for an infamous "peripheral canal." Brace yourselves, Northern California voters — there's another civil war at hand.

Before things get to that point, we'd like to take a moment to point out what's changed since that scorched-earth 1982 ballot battle, and what Sacramento needs to do before it even opens discussion about new ways to divert river water. Though the re-in-

troduction of the peripheral canal issue has all the elements of great politics — it's exciting, it's expensive and it gets the voters emotional — it doesn't have much to do with great policy for the delta, at least not right now. Building a peripheral canal would take at least 10 years. The delta can't wait that long.

The delta has been in ecological crisis for decades, and it's on the brink of collapse. Things have deteriorated so much — and so quickly — that biologists and water officials turned off the state-owned water pumps for nine days in June. That nine days wasn't long enough to help the delta, but it was enough to frighten water contractors all around the state. Now, for the first time, all of the interested parties — not just environmentalists and fishermen, but water officials and farmers, too — are all

clamoring for a new way to do things. Legislators and the governor have a tiny window of time in which they can implement bold new strategies to protect the delta and craft new water policy. They'd better not waste it.

The quickest way for them to mess up would be talking about ways to ensure Southern California's water — e.g., through a peripheral canal — before taking steps to protect the delta. Interim ideas about how to prevent the delta's collapse aren't sexy, but they're vital, and some of them have been neglected for a very long

time. Assemblywoman Lois Wolk, D-Davis, has assembled a fine list of suggestions, and we sure hope that they're included in one of the many bills that are in a rush to spend the \$5.4 billion in water

bond money voters just approved.

Ideas include restoring habitat and fish migration flows through the Yolo Bypass (\$50 million), restoring the Suisun Tidal Marsh, which would improve habitat for fish (\$50 million) and fully implementing some plans that are already designed, discussed, and ready to go: the Dutch Slough Tidal Marsh Restoration (\$30 million) and the McCormack Williamson Tract Flood Control and Ecosystem Restoration Project (\$70 million). Some of these projects will be good not only for the ecosystem, but also flood control, which means extra bang for taxpayer bucks.

Once our leadership shows us that it's serious about protecting the delta, then, maybe, we can talk about a peripheral canal. But let's start with peaceful projects first, please. There's plenty of time for war.

Proposal
for a new
'peripheral canal'
threatens to
ignite passions.