

Details of canal emerge

 [Print this Article](#)  [Email this Article](#)

Text Size: **A** | **A** | **A**

By **Alex Breitler**
Record Staff Writer
February 23, 2009 6:00 AM

Piece by piece, details are emerging about a peripheral canal that could skirt water around, rather than through, the Delta.

While officials planning for the estuary's future say no definite decisions have been made, documents under review as part of the Bay Delta Conservation Plan call for a relatively large canal that would divert anywhere from zero to two-thirds of Sacramento River flows depending on the time of year, under one scenario.

Officials are also leaning toward wrapping the canal around the east side of the Delta, rather than the west side, meaning it will likely cut through farmland in west San Joaquin County.

If you're going

Public comments on the Bay Delta Conservation Plan will be accepted during a March 24 public hearing in Stockton.

The meeting will be held from 6 to 10 p.m. at Stockton Memorial Civic Auditorium.

To learn more about the plan, or to read documents describing a possible canal, visit www.resources.ca.gov/bdcp.

A new public comment period has opened and a series of meetings will be held around the state, including in Stockton on March 24.

"The good news is it's becoming clearer. The bad news is it's becoming clearer," retired County Counsel Terry Dermody told San Joaquin County water commissioners last week. Dermody is watching Delta issues for the county.

The conservation plan is a complex mesh of habitat restoration, water supply and environmental goals that would ultimately give water contractors from the Bay Area, the San Joaquin Valley and Southern California legal authority to continue diverting water.

It's widely agreed that the status quo - sucking Sacramento River water through the Delta to the state and federal pumps near Tracy - isn't working. Smelt populations are crashing, and water exports have been cut.

In theory, a canal would reduce the number of fish killed at the pumps and secure much of the state's water supply should vulnerable levees fail. Opponents say that siphoning off the Sacramento River will turn the Delta into a swamp and would add no actual water to the system.

"The decision (to build a canal) was made before this whole thing started, in my opinion," said Stockton attorney Dante Nomellini, steadfast canal foe.

Here's what we know, and don't, about the proposed canal:

» The size. A Feb. 10 report by a Bay Delta Conservation Plan committee says a canal that can carry 15,000 cubic feet per second is the best choice. For perspective, that's enough water to fill an Olympic-size swimming pool in about six seconds; it's also roughly the maximum amount of water that can be exported from the pumps near Tracy.

A large canal allows for what officials call the "big gulp/small sip" strategy. That is, when the Sacramento River is bulging with water, they can take a big gulp; when it's a relative trickle, they can take a small sip.

The original peripheral canal, defeated by voters, would have carried up to 21,000 cubic feet per second with the intention that about 6,000 cubic feet per second be released back into the Delta, Nomellini said. Either way, he said, the canal will be little more than a dry ditch if the government respects Delta and upstream water rights.

» The straw. Where will the canal tap into the Sacramento River? Water may be diverted from five locations, from Freeport in the north to an area near the Delta Cross Channel south of Hood, a January report says. Altogether, those five diversions would account for the 15,000 cubic feet per second maximum.

» The route. A canal has been studied for either the west or east side of the Delta, but draft reports say the east alignment is most likely, and likely cheaper.

Exactly what path the canal will take is unclear. The state Department of Water Resources is surveying land in the Delta for that purpose.

Karla Nemeth, a spokeswoman for the conservation plan process, said public comments will help officials determine a number of alternatives outlining what works best for people, fish and water quality.

"We're looking at a lot of information, and a canal is part of that," she said.

Contact reporter Alex Breitler at (209) 546-8295