



Getting Better Together:

Opinion Editorial by

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There's a saying in politics and government that no good deed goes unpunished. The Bee's editorial about efforts to better manage California's two major water projects – the federal Central Valley Project and the State Water Project – is a case in point.

Major water interests in California – some of them historic enemies – sat down recently and worked out one of the most significant water management agreements in more than a decade. By better coordinating operations of the CVP and the SWP, these groups identified efficiencies that will provide more water for cities, farms and the environment without taking water away from anyone. It is a simple, but fundamental, step toward realizing some of the benefits long promised by the cooperative state-federal partnership known as CALFED.

CALFED was founded on the principles of collaboration and innovation – uncommon elements in California water politics. For many urban officials and farmers, a critical aspect of the program was that water supplies would improve *along with* implementation of environmental protections. In short, everyone would get better together. That was the promise that persuaded us to continue to support the CALFED program even when it appeared it would never deliver on that simple promise.

CALFED was quick on delivering environmental benefits. Since 2000, it has invested more than \$500 million in some 400 ecosystem restoration projects. The Environmental Water Account, which purchases water from willing sellers each year for salmon and steelhead, has resulted in the shift of nearly 1 million acre feet of water for these species. We supported these programs then, and we support them now, as long as they are part of a balanced package.

By putting aside historic disagreements, and recognizing the need for permanent environmental protections, CVP and SWP water users have created a platform to work cooperatively. Water users in California – especially those of us in the San Joaquin Valley who rely on CVP water – now believe CALFED can deliver on its promise that everyone – the environment, cities, farmers and fish – can all get better together.

Imagine then our reaction to the Bee's January 20 editorial (Pumping Up) that resurrected many of the outdated clichés about “subsidies,” “water grabs,” and “sucking sounds.” The editorial seemed to suggest that farmers and other water users are unwilling to share with the environment the additional water created by improved management efficiencies. It further suggested that the modest additional Delta exports – something recommended by CALFED – should be mitigated at additional cost to farmers.

Farmers and other water users have paid dearly to restore the Bay/Delta ecosystem. Farmers on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley have seen more than 1 million acre feet of precious water taken from them – without recourse or compensation – and redirected to environmental uses. They pay millions each year into a habitat restoration fund to restore the Bay/Delta's fishery. And they regularly see their water deliveries halted, sometimes in the middle of the growing season, in order to protect endangered fish.

The modest increase in water deliveries to farmers anticipated in the recent cooperative agreement is a mere fraction of the water taken from them involuntarily for the environment. (The cooperative agreement anticipates providing an additional 250,000 acre feet of water for export from the Delta – not the 1 million acre feet the Bee editorial claimed.)

Anyone familiar with CALFED knows that until recently, the environment was the program's highest priority. Now, at the first glimmer of hope that some of the promised improved supplies might actually come to pass, the Bee and a handful of perpetually unhappy activists seem determined to upend this historic state and federal partnership.

It is, frankly, dishonest for these groups to now complain that farmers and cities are unfairly benefiting. They were major supporters of the program when it focused on the environment – while federal laws and policies were taking water and money away from farmers. And they knew full well that one of CALFED's ultimate objectives was to restore water certainty to the cities and farms in the Valley and Southern California.

If California is to successfully balance the water needs of its growing population with its limited water resources, it is absolutely vital that we move beyond bromides and the rigid ideologies of the past. Water users have come to recognize the benefits of cooperation and communication. If we are smart, honest and willing to work together, we are convinced that at long last, we really all can get better together. And that is a promise worth keeping.

Dan Nelson is Executive Director of the San Luis & Delta-Mendota Water Authority, a joint powers authority comprised of 32 Central Valley Project contractors south of the Delta. The Authority, with headquarters in Los Banos, represents urban water districts that rely on CVP water, farmers who irrigate more than 1 million acres of prime agricultural lands in the San Joaquin Valley, and 200,000 acres of waterfowl habitat.

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