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COMMENTARY

Ventura County has big stake in Delta water project

In two months, between January and March, more than enough water to supply all the homes in Ventura County for a year slipped down the Sacramento River and out to the ocean after rules to protect the environment and water quality had been met.

If we had already upgraded the state and federal pumping system in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta as proposed, we could have moved that water into storage without harming native fish species.

Ventura County residents who pay little mind to the debate over the Delta 300 miles away should

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think again: Our effort to modernize the Delta water delivery system will directly affect the economic vitality of Ventura County, and for that matter a majority of the state.

Many jobs, homes and businesses here depend heavily on Delta water and have a big stake in Gov. Jerry Brown's proposal to build new intakes and tunnels to safeguard and stabilize water deliveries from the Delta.

Some cities in Ventura County have no other substantial source of water. Faucets throughout the Conejo and Simi valleys exclusively run with water carried by the California Aqueduct from the Delta. Moorpark, Camarillo, Oxnard, Port Hueneme and Naval Base Ventura County are 50 to 75 percent dependent on this same water supply. Most of the recycled water used in southern Ventura County comes first from the Delta.

Water districts here invest in conservation, recycling and groundwater desalination, but the Delta provides three-quarters

of the supply for three-quarters of the county's population.

That supply is at risk. Native fish populations have been declining drastically in the estuary from which state and federal systems draw water. To protect fish, pumps have been curtailed, restricting water supplies even when rivers run high from winter storms. The Delta system also is vulnerable to abrupt disruption should an earthquake or flood collapse its dirt levees.

After nine years of analysis, federal and state agencies propose a way to better protect fish from

water diversions and ensure deliveries in the event of a natural disaster. We would build three well-screened intakes in the north Delta along the Sacramento River and two parallel tunnels, 150 feet underground, to carry the water south to existing state and federal conveyance facilities.

New intakes and tunnels would allow the State Water Project and federal Central Valley Project to reduce the volume of water they pump directly from south Delta channels. This would minimize unnatural flows that can draw migratory fish off course and put

them at risk of predators and pumps. New intakes would give water project operators more flexibility to move water when flows are high.

The project could make a modest improvement in overall state and federal water project deliveries. More importantly, it would prevent a serious erosion of existing supplies. The experience of the last few decades shows that if native fish species continue to decline, so will water deliveries.

John Laird is California Secretary for Natural Resources.