



CALIFORNIA FORUM

Q&A | Water

A view of Delta tunnels from south state

BY THE EDITORIAL BOARD

Jeffrey Kightlinger, general manager of the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, offered The Sacramento Bee's editorial board his view of California's plumbing system last week.

He opened by talking about Southern California's conservation efforts and went on to discuss Gov. Jerry Brown's proposal to build twin tunnels to ship water to farms and residents south of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.



Jeffrey Kightlinger

In 1990, Metropolitan Water District sold 2.5 million acre-feet of water, its record. Since then, 5 million more people have moved to Southern California. This year, one of the driest on record, the Southern California water agency, which delivers wholesale water to local water districts, will sell 2.1 million acre-feet, Kightlinger said.

Water use is up this year, right?

"We typically set aside rebates of \$20 million a year for things like ultra-low flow toilets. ... The big development has been turf.

"We used to offer \$1 a square foot to remove turf. For this drought, we bumped it to \$2 a square foot. We generally spend \$20 million. I asked the board for authority to spend \$40 million this year and got that approved. The city of Los Angeles is matching it with a dollar. So if you live in L.A., you get \$3 a

square foot (for lawn removal and new landscaping).

"What we haven't seen is a decrease in water use. One reason is that this has been a hot summer. Secondly, a lot of folks are looking at last year. Are we down 20 percent from last year?

"We think it is more accurate to look at water years. So 2006 to 2009 was a similar weather pattern to 2012 to 2014. From those two periods, we're down 15 percent. We haven't yet gotten close to 20 percent from last year."

How do you persuade Delta people that the tunnel project is good for them?

"I don't know that it necessarily is good for someone, but it's certainly not bad. ...

"I get that some people have a philosophy that no water should be taken. We've been taking water out of the Delta for 60 some years now. ... We've built around that concept. Is there a better way to do that than taking it from the south end of the Delta?

"If you care about fish, if you care about ecosystem, if you care about water quality, if you care about reliability, every metric says pulling it from north of the Delta is smarter than pulling it from the south. ...

"Now, half our state population is below the Tehachapis, and 60 percent of the state's economy. ... What we're trying to do is make the existing system work."

Is there a concern about salinity buildup in the Delta with the tunnels?

"We've modeled it. ... There is



Randall Benton Sacramento Bee file

An aerial view of the region that is the proposed site of the middle intake for Delta water tunnels, in the Courtland area.

some higher salinity in the Delta, which has pros and cons. If you're a farmer, it is a con. If you're a native fish, it is a pro. They like the higher salinity. It's the (non-native) striped bass that likes the fresh water. For building a more natural ecosystem, it is a pro.

"People think 9,000 cubic feet per second is a huge amount of water. But that's the peak. The peak only moves through it when you have a wet year. When it is dry, you back way down."

What would the tunnels cost and who would pay?

"It will be around \$15 billion for the tunnels. ... Right now the thinking is state and federal contractors will be paying for it through their

water rates. ...

"Costs are going to follow the water. ... So about 30 percent is residential, and 70 percent is agriculture."

Would there be a net increase in the amount of water transported south?

"Most likely, no, in the long run. A lot of folks have focused on how much water it produces. These are all based on an average hydrology curve, which is to look at the past and predict what we think is going to happen. Then we build into it a climate change assumption. ...

"We're currently losing 25 to 30 percent of our water in any year when the biological restrictions kick in. We'd like to see some of that 25 to 30 percent we're losing recovered. How much of that will be recovered, I don't know."

If the tunnels don't get built, what would happen?

"What you'll see is degradation, continued downward spiral in the Delta, continued battles in the courts, lots of litigation and presumably less water supply for export."

Could MWD serve its customers without Delta water?

"Southern California has options. What you probably could not do is serve the Central Valley.

"We're going to be saying that 4 million acres of farmland, that we're going to mine the groundwater till it's out and then ... walk away, or we're going to shrink it. Instead of 4 million acres, we can only do 500,000 acres and the rest goes out of business."