The BDCP should analyze a smaller dual-conveyance alternative consisting of one 3,000 cubic feet per second screened intake and tunnel combined with environmentally sustainable levels of diversions from the South Delta. This smaller tunnel may produce better outcomes for fisheries, minimize costs to water exporters, and provide an emergency water supply in the event of levee failure.

This large facility faces four significant obstacles:

First, the prospective costs for this concept have jumped from an initial estimate of just under $4 billion to over $10 billion and are likely to rise further, making it unaffordable for the agricultural and urban water districts that would have to pay for it.

Second, the prospects of success with this large and costly facility are uncertain. It is unclear how the project would be operated and how operations would adapt to changing information and circumstances. Nor are the large facility’s environmental and economic pacts clear. It does not make sense to spend upwards of ten billion dollars on a facility that may not produce positive outcomes for the environment or be a reliable source of water for exporters.

Third, the project faces strong opposition from farmers, residents, and recreators in the Delta and elsewhere.

Lastly, there is significant uncertainty about whether the federal regulatory agencies would approve such a massive project under the Clean Water Act and the Endangered Species Act.

A NEW OPTION

The BDCP should consider the alternative that includes a 3,000 cubic feet per second screened intake and tunnel combined with acceptable levels of water diversions from the South Delta.

This conservative intake and tunnel may have multiple advantages. Specifically:

• A tunnel, as opposed to an open 45-mile canal, would avoid massive impacts to agriculture and terrestrial species, which would reduce project costs.

• A smaller tunnel with one intake would be more affordable than a larger canal with five intakes.
• The smaller tunnel would match up to the already-identified 3,000 cubic feet per second maximum intake size that avoids impinging salmonids on fish screens.

• A smaller tunnel with an intake upstream on the Sacramento River would allow for reduced South Delta diversions when fish are in that area of the estuary.

• A water intake on the Sacramento River would maintain emergency water supplies to Delta exporters if South Delta diversions become unusable due to catastrophic levee failure.

• A smaller tunnel would face less opposition than the large Peripheral Canal.

• A smaller tunnel might reduce the risk of unforeseen consequences that could result from a larger facility.

“A smaller tunnel might reduce the risk of unforeseen consequences.”

• Operation of a smaller tunnel will provide state and federal operators an opportunity to evaluate how effectively a new conveyance structure is being managed, allowing for fine-tuning before further changes in diversions are considered.

With the rising costs and uncertainty surrounding the originally-proposed project, the members of the BDCP should carefully evaluate a smaller and more affordable alternate conveyance facility.