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Delta tunnel project still stuck with unacceptable baggage

BY THE EDITORIAL BOARD

Kudos are in order for Mark Cowin, the director of the California Department of Water Resources. For months, Cowin has taken seriously the concerns of farmers and landowners whose lives and businesses could be upended by a gargantuan water tunnel project the state wants to build through the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

Last week, DWR officials announced changes that would reduce the impact of the project. The alignment of the tunnels would be shifted away from communities such as Courtland and Walnut Grove. A forebay would be scaled down in size and be relocated away from the Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge. DWR also proposes fewer "tunnel muck" areas on private lands, with their locations moved to state-owned land near Interstate 5.

All that is good, and Cowin and other state officials deserve credit for listening to affected residents, and attempting to respond. That said, DWR's new plan doesn't fundamentally change the dynamics of the Bay Delta Conservation Plan. State and federal officials, pressured by powerful water contractors south of the Delta, are still charging forward with a "my-way-or-the-highway" approach to water planning, saying they will build a tunnel without a vote of lawmakers and over the objections of most of the Delta and Northern California.

They still haven't provided guarantees to north state water users that their water supplies and ecosystems won't be harmed by tunnel diversions. And as The Sacramento Bee's Matt Weiser reported Thursday, in attempting to solve one problem, the new DWR tunnel alignment would create others.

Under the new proposal, the tunnels would be realigned to the east, passing under Staten Island, a vital habitat for sandhill cranes and other birds. The island is owned by the Nature Conservancy and protected by conservation easements, and some conservancy members are stunned that this realignment would even be considered.

Legal questions abound on whether the state could bore tunnels under this land and not violate the easements. Of more importance is whether the state could attempt such a massive industrial project and have little or no impact on the cranes and other sensitive species.

If state and federal officials hope to salvage BDCP, they need to come up with solutions that reduce the project's impact, as opposed to transferring that impact elsewhere. And while it may be too late to build any kind of trust with stakeholders in the Delta and Northern California, there are steps they could take to reduce the mistrust.

One big step would be to specify, in greater detail, exactly how this project would be operated in different situations. How much water would be diverted during different periods of the year – when salmon are migrating, for instance? How much would be diverted in dry and wet years, and those in between?

Only that kind of specificity – along with decisions on how much water is needed for Delta flows to help fish – will put upstream water users at ease, or at least alarm them less. Operational details would also help settle the ongoing debate about the costs and benefits of this project.

A respected Berkeley economist hired by BDCP recently released a report concluding the tunnels will pencil out for water contractors that would pay the $16 billion cost. Yet as the Legislative Analyst told a Senate panel Tuesday, the projected economic benefit of the tunnel project is "fragile."

Cost overruns on the project could jack up the price of delivered water. So could requirements for Delta fish flows, if the extra water needed for those flows comes out of current water exports.

The uncertainties are too great for DWR and BDCP proponents to keep charging ahead, hoping they will have a permit sometime in the near future.

These questions must be settled.

Until they are, the changes DWR announced last week will just add gloss to an ugly project that few Californians will want to be associated with. As a Delta farmer might say, "You can't add lipstick to a pig."