



Water plays a key role in the Sacramento region, which sports 2 million acres of farmland and most of the state's rice crop, such as this field in the Yolo Bypass.

DENNIS MCCOY | SACRAMENTO BUSINESS JOURNAL

Northern California water interests unite

Key concern: Any plan for Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta water diversion must be fair

MELANIE TURNER | STAFF WRITER

Urban, agricultural and environmental interests have banded together to speak with one voice in an effort to protect the region's water supply from thirsty Southern California and San Joaquin Valley interests.

The Sacramento region sits between what is forecasted to be a declining snowpack in the Sierra — resulting in less surface water — and the Delta, which scientists say needs more fresh-water flow. Seemingly at odds with that reality, south-of-Delta water contractors, facing needs of their own, want even more water.

Many here have been articulating a common message — insisting that any plan for a massive Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta water diversion must be fair to north-of-Delta

interests. But the message has been somewhat scattered, say members of the newly formed North State Water Alliance, which aims to ensure the region has sufficient high-quality water for future growth.

"We began to realize we need to be unified in our region," said David Guy, president of one of the alliance's key members, the Northern California Water Association, which represents more than 60 water suppliers and local governments that provide water for farms, wildlife refuges, rural communities and fisheries in the Sacramento Valley.

Aligning more closely, alliance members say, is a matter of survival.

Lawmakers in 2009 ordered up sweeping reforms intended to strike a balance between environmental protection and demands for Delta water. The Delta is the state's water supply crossroads, serving 25 million people and hundreds of acres of farmland.

A big part of those reforms is the controversial Bay Delta Conservation Plan, largely focused on building

a giant, \$13 billion canal or tunnel to move water around the Delta to convey water to Central and Southern California.

As plans move ahead to restore strained aquatic habitats and improve water deliveries, the stakes are high for regional interests, from ag and industrial to urban, environmental and recreational. Could the political debate over water compromise water reliability? "It is a tremendous threat to economic vitality," said Roger Niello, president and chief executive officer of the Sacramento Metro Chamber.

Businesses such as Nippon Shokken USA Inc., which is moving its headquarters from Torrance to West Sacramento, are drawn here by the supply of high-quality water.

"We're saying as a region our strength is in numbers," added Dennis Rogers, Metro Chamber's senior vice president of public policy and economic development. "We need to get together because we need to protect our rights and our rights are our quality of life."

THEY HAVE SACOG'S BACK

Alliance members want to help decision makers understand why it's critical for north-of-Delta interests to be part of any Delta solution.

Five core partners make up the North State Water Alliance, which together represent about 150 cities, counties, water suppliers, businesses and community groups. Core members are the NCWA, Metro Chamber, Regional Water Authority, Sacramento Area Council of Governments and the Mountain Counties Water Resources Association.

"In the past we've had a lot of separate agencies who maybe were saying the same thing but not necessarily as one agency, not as Northern California," SACOG senior planner David Shabazian said. "This gives us a united voice."

Alliance members will call upon each other's strengths, Guy said.

While SACOG is not an organization of water experts, other members of the alliance closely follow the state's

'If you have water rights that you cannot exercise because the flows prohibit you from taking any more water out of the river, then what good is the water right?'

Roger Niello
president and
CEO, Sacramento
Metro Chamber

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water plans and related legislation. In turn, SACOG, a planning agency representing 22 cities and six counties, can lend a regional voice to help educate elected officials.

“SACOG has a pretty big megaphone and we will use that if we have to,” Shabazian said.

Since 2007, SACOG has been getting more educated on water as part of a Rural-Urban Connections Strategy — an effort intended to ensure the region’s rural areas are sustainable.

“We have a lot of technical capacity that helps us back up arguments with data and modeling,” Shabazian said. For example, if water supplies run short, SACOG can examine impacts to the region’s crops, the value of those crops and how many jobs are affected. “If we have to start running those numbers to make our case, we can do that now,” he said.

ADOPTING COMMON PRINCIPLES

Meanwhile, the Regional Water Authority, a joint-powers authority representing 20 local water providers and associated agencies, took the lead last fall in developing a set of common principles for local jurisdictions, chambers of commerce and others (see list on page 17). The Sacramento City Council was the first elected body to unanimously support the five principles, which emphasize the importance of engaging upstream users in the solutions.

“I think we felt like that didn’t happen with the 2009 legislation to a large extent,” RWA executive director John Woodling said.

Since then, a dozen elected bodies, most of RWA’s members and many local chambers have all adopted the principles. As more people agree on a common message, the hope is the region will wield greater political clout.



The Yolo Bypass not only provides flood protection for the Sacramento region but also helps keep too much water from flowing into the Delta at once.

DENNIS McCOY
SACRAMENTO BUSINESS JOURNAL

“I think this provides us with this framework that allows us to engage in the Legislature, in other regional programs...as a solid group with this common message,” said Todd Manley, director of government relations for the Northern California Water Association.

A big part of the alliance’s mission is to make sure people know this is a special region, Guy said.

It’s home to the state Capitol, a large metro area, 2 million acres of farmland, six national wildlife refuges and 50 state wildlife areas, including half the threatened species in California, he said.

“What we’re trying to say is you

shouldn’t sacrifice one region of California for another,” he said.

A WATERSHED MOMENT

Alliance members can’t pinpoint exactly when they decided to join forces, but Senate Bill 7 was a definite turning point.

“I think the 2009 legislation made us realize that individually we really didn’t have a very strong voice,” Rogers said.

The bill identified three related processes. It called for the creation of a plan to restore the Delta ecosystem and provide a more reliable water system for California. A sixth draft of the Delta Plan was released last week; a final plan could be

adopted as early as November.

As part of that, lawmakers identified the Bay Delta Conservation Plan. A public draft of the state-federal plan is now expected in September. The bill also required the State Water Resources Control Board to establish “environmentally protective” inflow standards for the Delta.

Niello, who was a state assemblyman when the bill was adopted, said there “wasn’t a thread of partisanship” in the debate. “The only commonality was geography.”

Still, alliance members say they

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ALLIANCE | Members say north state is happy to share, but they will fight for water rights

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understand that Southern California needs water, too.

“Crippling the south state is not good for a region highly dependent on state government,” Rogers said. “We want to be a constructive part of that solution but not to our own detriment.”

Alliance members’ biggest concern is that the way water is managed upstream to benefit the Delta could create reduced water for upstream businesses, residents and farms, and for environments on the American, Sacramento and Yuba rivers.

“By taking more water for the Delta, we upset recreation, we upset the environment, we raise the cost of water and we reduce the ability to generate hydropower, which has environmental impacts elsewhere,” Woodling said.

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE FLOW

The alliance is particularly concerned about the “flow criteria” for the Delta. In August 2010, the State Water Board issued a report that, if imposed, would greatly increase reservoir releases in winter and spring.

An analysis conducted by a coalition of public water and power agencies, which includes the Sacramento Municipal Utility District, concluded that forcing larger flows into the Delta from January through June would have serious consequences upstream, reducing water available to the public, harming spawning salmon and steelhead, and cutting hydroelectric power generation by up to half in the summer.

The State Water Board said a more comprehensive scientific review would be required before establishing final flow rules. Even so, alliance members worry about the potential for water shortages in dry years.

“The variance of rainfall in Northern California is huge,” Niello said. “If there is a (canal or tunnel), what happens in the really dry years?”

If more water has to flow from reservoirs instead of being stored, it lessens the ability to generate hydropower in the summer

when more people run air conditioners, they say. “In my view it debilitates our ability to be prepared for a drought,” Guy said.

“You hear people say continually nobody’s water rights are being compromised with regard to SB 7, and technically that’s true,” Niello said. “But if you have water rights that you cannot exercise because the flows prohibit you from taking any more water out of the river, then what good is the water right?”

EVERYBODY WANTS MORE WATER

If adopted, the Bay Delta Conservation Plan would grant a 50-year environmental permit to the Delta’s big state and federal water operations.

Woodling, of the Regional Water Authority, points out that in many cases local water districts have senior water rights, meaning they were acquired prior to the state and federal water projects. The San Juan Water District, for example, has rights dating back to the 1850s.

The system is set up, he said, so when there’s not enough water to go around, junior water-rights holders lose all rights. “It’s not a shared thing,” he said.

The alliance is not opposed to a solution that involves exporting water to Southern California, as long as it respects current water rights in the north.

Members emphasize that Northern California already has been doing its part to

conserve water and protect species, and likely will do more.

While per capita urban water usage has dropped in the past 10 years, more water will be needed in order for businesses to grow and for ag processing to return to the region, Woodling said.

“It’s incredibly important from an economic development and a jobs base,” Rogers said. “Without water you don’t have economic development and you don’t have jobs.”



MELANIE TURNER covers energy, environment, clean technology, agriculture, transportation, media and marketing.

melanieturner@bizjournals.com | 916-558-7859

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Principles of the North State Water Alliance

- Water-rights priorities and area-of-origin assurances must be recognized and protected to ensure reliable supplies for all water users and environmental needs in our region.
- Stakeholders in the Sacramento region must be fully included in and consulted on all aspects of development of a Delta solution and other state and federal water policies that affect the region.
- A Delta solution and other state or federal actions must honor and not reduce or preempt the authority and responsibilities of cities, counties and other local agencies.
- The Sacramento region and Northern California will continue to invest in and implement water supply, water efficiency, recycling and re-use, storage and other water management projects and programs that are cost effective and improve our regional self-sufficiency.
- The Alliance will support a Delta solution that:
 - is based on sound science to ensure it is effective and implemented in an equitable manner;
 - requires the beneficiaries of any actions associated with a Delta solution to fully fund the costs of such actions;
 - avoids or fully mitigates negative economic, environmental or societal impacts to areas in our region.



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