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An Open Letter on the California Water Fix – Part 5

Who Is Writing the Governor's Material?

California Governor and stand-up comedian, Jerry Brown, has recently been saying some entertaining things about the scheme to build twin tunnels under the Delta, now called the California Water Fix.

First he said “*until you've put a million hours into it,*” estimating the amount of staff time devoted to the project, “*shut up.*” <http://www.sacbee.com/news/politics-government/capitol-alert/article20375127.html>

The Bee reports that his office later said that he made these remarks in jest, although I think that number is about right. It spans two administrations, eight years, and at last count, \$236.8 million. But, I'm prepared to accept that he was just joking about the critics needing to shut up. What is not so much of a joke, however, is that all this time and money has gone down the drain due to inadequate management and direction. It is not clear whether the Governor understands that reality.

Then, at a breakfast meeting hosted by the California Chamber of Commerce, one of the organizations that is running TV ads under the name Californians for Water Security in support of the California Water Fix, the Governor said that all that stands between the salt water of San Francisco Bay and the fresh water running through the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta to tens of millions of users and farms to the south are an aging network of levees and berms that are “*going to crash at some point*” because of rising sea waters caused by climate change or an earthquake. “*It would be a bad day,*” Brown told hundreds of business and civic leaders at the 90th annual Sacramento Host Breakfast. Highlighting Silicon Valley's reliance on Delta water, “*We're not talking a few billion – we're talking hundreds of billions of dollars of economic loss,*” he said. <http://www.sacbee.com/news/politics-government/capitol-alert/article22541730.html>

This must have come from propaganda put out by the Silicon Valley Leadership Group or the Southern California Water Committee because numbers like that appear nowhere in official documents. For more like the truth about the Delta levee system, see the report by Brian Heap on KCRA3 <http://www.kcra.com/news/Expert-accuses-state-of-spinning-Delta-quake-threat/33233218> and Part 4 of this open letter.

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And for a more official estimate of the potential cost of interruption of water exports from the Delta, see <http://mavensnotebook.com/2013/07/29/dr-sunding-makes-his-case-for-the-bdcp-to-metropolitans-special-committee-on-the-bay-delta/> which includes “*the new BDCP analysis essentially demonstrates that the Governor and other proponents have exaggerated the risk of a Delta earthquake on water supplies,*” said Dr. Sunding. Assuming a one-year outage, Sunding found that “*you have something on the order of a half billion of seismic risk reduction benefits that come from construction of CM1 – the 9,000 cfs conveyance facility.*” Even that is conservative, however, as studies conducted by RMA for the BDCP indicate that the Delta likely flushes out with fresh water within six months after the worse than worst case assumption of 20 flooded islands.

Then, in another attempt at humor, acknowledging that some people in the audience likely oppose the tunnels project, Brown joked that it might come down to an issue of semantics. “*Instead of a tunnel, we’re going to call it a pipe. That seems to be more popular,*” he said to laughter. What have these people been smoking in their pipes?

Perhaps more interestingly, in a less widely read report of the same meeting, <http://www.bizjournals.com/sacramento/news/2015/05/28/governor-to-business-leaders-dont-stop-thinking.html> , the Governor said that those who criticize the Delta plan are unsophisticated. Brown said he is now reading through tens of thousands of pages of environmental documents for the project -- and urged critics to read more before naysaying. “*It’s complicated, that’s all I can say. And we’re doing the best we can for the long term health of California,*” he said. Well, part of that is true – it is complicated, but to call the critics “unsophisticated” is an unforced error on the Governor’s part. The critics may not have majored in the classics at UC Berkeley like the Governor did, but I for one have a Ph.D. in geotechnical and earthquake engineering with a minor in environmental planning from the same school, which I respectfully suggest might be more relevant. And the more serious critics have read the tens of thousands of pages of environmental documents and found them to be incoherent and incomplete. What the Governor really needs to read are the hundreds of pages of comments that have been submitted on the public draft of the BDCP EIR/EIS and the letter from the Federal EPA which is what actually forced the latest reboot of the tunnel plan. And who is to say that a relatively unsophisticated Delta farmer might not have more applicable knowledge and commonsense than the rest of us?

But I'm willing to give the Governor the benefit of doubt on all this and assume that he has been poorly advised. What I am not willing to do is put up with more nonsense like this from the first report in the Bee that is linked above: Brown spokesman Evan Westrup said in an email that the administration listens "*to critics and supporters alike. That's a big part of the million hours we've put into this project and we'll keep the same open spirit in the coming months.*"

That is simply not true and no matter how many times Evan or various spokespersons for the DWR make statements like this, that does not make it true. What is true is that a serious study of possible alternatives to the Twin Tunnels has never been conducted. What is true is that what was in the Public Draft EIR/EIS on alternatives is a joke. I might suggest that the Governor read my comments on that draft to get up to speed on this issue. But beyond that, the administration has never seriously engaged with critics. It is true that after a private meeting with landowners in the North Delta, the alignment of the tunnels was changed (to place them under Staten island, an important wildlife refuge – talk about jumping out of the frying pan into the fire) and that the proposed intakes in the North Delta have been modified (to what they could have been more like originally), but these changes are little more than fig leaves. My own experience, which is non untypical of others, is that I did manage to arrange a meeting with John Laird, the Secretary for Natural Resources, early in the Brown administration's current tenure. Secretary Laird was abrupt and dismissive to the point of rudeness. My two meetings with then Under Secretary Jerry Meral were much more cordial but Jerry's indications of interest and willingness to respond were empty. At least the Secretary was honest.

But, like many others, some more knowledgeable about the history and complexities of California water policy and politics than I am, I'd still be willing to sit down with the Governor and his immediate advisors, if only to offers some better jokes.

For a suggestion as to a meeting place, see:

http://www.lodinews.com/opinion/columnists/guest_columnists/article_4cd9ca26-9585-5d62-aff3-b5da679680ao.html

Check out <http://FixCAWater.com> for the earlier open letters in this series.

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