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An Open Letter on the California Water Fix – Part 7 On Better Alternatives to the Twin Tunnels

Last week Maven's Notebook published an excellent guest commentary by Craig Wilson, the former Delta Watermaster <http://mavensnotebook.com/2015/06/16/guest-commentary-former-delta-watermaster-craig-wilson-with-more-on-his-alternative-to-the-delta-tunnels/> and the Bureau of Reclamation announced the three alternatives that are going to be evaluated for the purposes of an EIR/EIS for the California Water Fix, a.k.a. The Fix, and for determination of the least environmentally damaging alternative for purposes of the Clean Water Act. These three alternatives are just variations on the same theme as the BDCP with one or more tunnels under the Delta, and one, three or five intakes on the Sacramento River in the North Delta. There will be no consideration of alternate points of diversion although that will clearly be an issue when the sponsors of The Fix go before the State Water Board requesting a permit for changing the point of diversion for the CVP and the SWP. It should hardly be necessary to suggest that the change in the name from the BDCP to The Fix does not appear to have been accompanied by any increase in either wisdom or effectiveness.

Rather more positively, there are not one but two pieces of wisdom in Craig Wilson's commentary. The first has nothing to do with water conveyance but has to do with him noting that the word limits that are typically applied to Op-Eds in newspapers are insufficient to allow adequate discussion of complex issues. This is really important because it means that there is no readily available forum to respond adequately to official pronouncements and slanted arguments such as those being made in the TV advertisements being run in support of The Fix by Californians for Water Security. The fact that we are better off than Russia, where President Putin and his cronies control all the major media outlets, does not mean that we have close to a level playing field in expressing our opinions with adequate supporting arguments. There are important things that are usually lost in both short newspaper and TV reports. In particular, if one wants to get quoted in the press or heard on the air, you usually have to talk in catchy sound bites, to become what journalists called a quote machine in fact. That creates another problem because some journalists tend to go to the same people over and over again because they know that they can get usable quotes rather than in-depth but boring explanations. This is where Maven is providing an outstanding service by both transcribing reports of meetings and presentations that otherwise don't get fully reported and providing space or links to articles of at least moderate length that allow for something more than colorful quotes or sound bites.

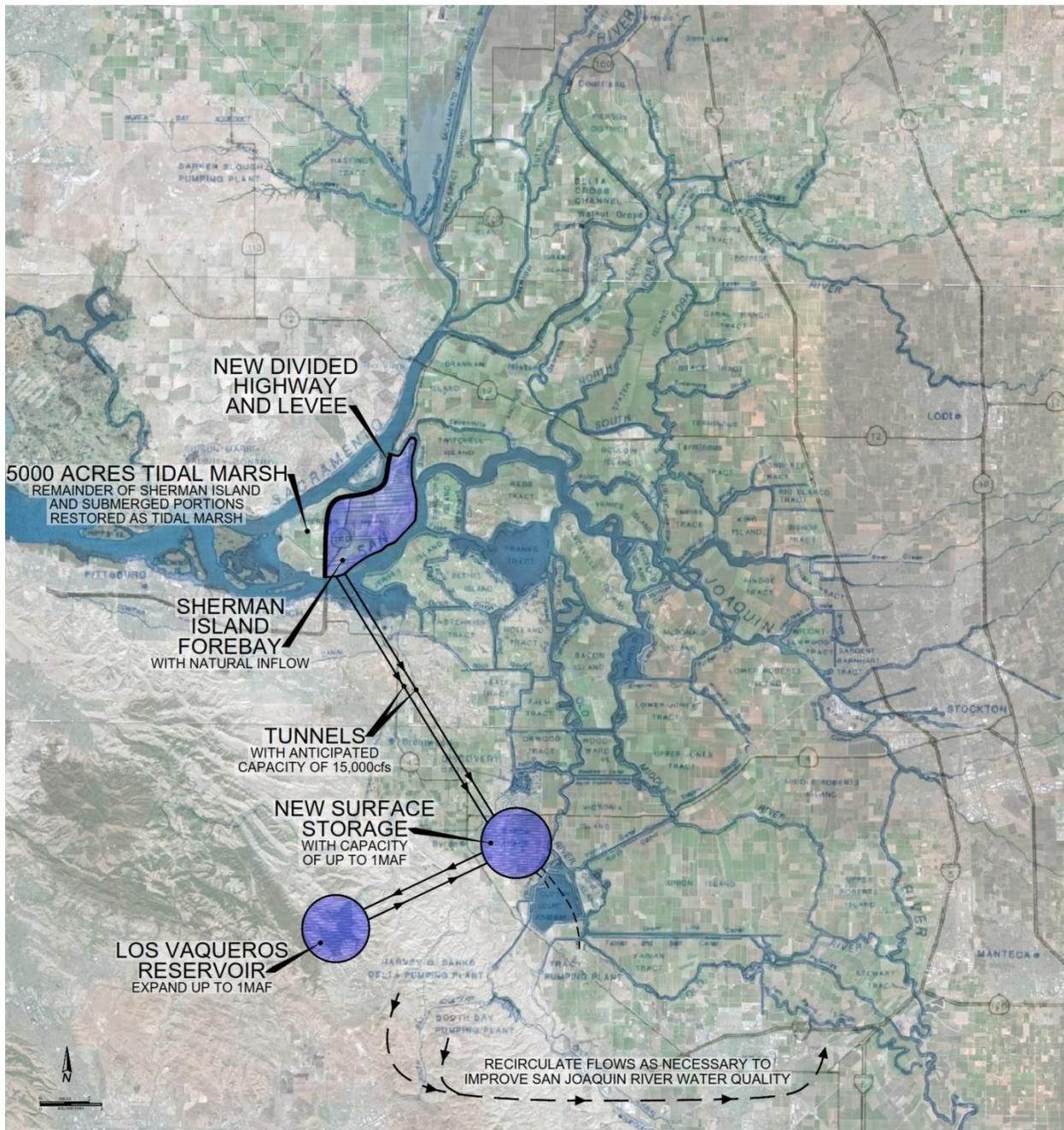
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The other piece of wisdom in Craig Wilson's commentary is his suggestion that one or more tunnels drawing water from the North Delta is not the optimum solution to the twin problems of reliable water exports and protecting and enhancing the Delta, as called for by the Delta Reform Act of 2009. He says "*The alternative I propose addresses the potential benefits of the Tunnels Plan and avoids the drawbacks. Let's call it the Western Delta Conveyance System. The System consists of three major elements: a western Delta diversion /conveyance facility, an operable gate downstream of the diversion points, and a facility to ensure that the quality of water diverted into the western Delta conveyance is of adequate quality. A western Delta conveyance system would fully restore the natural west to east flow pattern in the Delta. Fresh water would flow through the Delta to the western diversion points. In addition to restoring the natural flow pattern and improving Delta water quality, a western Delta conveyance facility would be much less expensive to build than the 40-mile Tunnel Plan. The alternative system would be less than one third the length, would require only one or two diversion structures, and such structures could be built on state owned land on Sherman Island instead of on lands that would be taken from third parties.*"

This Western Delta Conveyance System (WDCS) is not dissimilar to my own Western Delta Intakes Concept (WDIC). See <http://FixCAWater.com> for details. The WDIC was the outgrowth of a white paper written by Tom Zuckerman and others for Delta Vision <http://nebula.wsimg.com/595e6fbcbe2738977a5973a0e478cbb1?AccessKeyId=AD7307F3D4020EDFF747&disposition=o&alloworigin=1> which makes the point that at least partially restoring natural flows through the Delta is necessary to prevent further degradation of the Bay Delta ecosystem. The use of Sherman Island as an intake forebay in the WDIC also makes it self-regulating since excessive pumping will draw salt water into the forebay and shut down the project. The WDIC also includes additional ecosystem restoration measures and provides for a true "Big Gulp, Little Sip" approach to water exports by providing a way of extracting rather more water during periods of high flow in order to allow extraction of little or no water during periods of low flow. In spite of claims to the contrary, the BDCP or The Fix do not do this. Under the WDIC, the surplus that is extracted during periods of high flow over current demand would be used to replenish the currently overdrafted groundwater basins in the San Joaquin Valley. As with the WDCS, the WDIC is intended to be a Win-Win deal for both the Delta and the water exporters.

I am not sure that the second and third elements of the WDCS, an operable gate downstream of the diversion points, and a facility to ensure that the quality of water diverted into the western Delta conveyance is of adequate quality, are necessary or cost-effective, but that is something that can be worked out in more detailed studies. The key thing is that such studies must be conducted as part of the evaluation of alternatives for The Fix if The Fix has any chance of surviving the minefield of regulations and lawsuits that it will face. Let's start on that now!



Schematic of the Western Delta Intakes Concept

(Note that inflow into Sherman Island would be through permeable embankments which would be the world's largest and finest fish screens. See <http://FixCAWater.com> for details. Let's become the world leader in sustainable water resource development, as opposed to a world leader in over-exploiting our natural resources.)