Bay Delta Conservation Plan: System of tunnels, levee reconstruction best approach to protecting state, Silicon Valley water supply

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Our state water system is broken and needs to be fixed.

There is no question that significant investments are needed to address the scale of the challenge we face. The real issue is what to do, particularly about the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, and how we pay for it.

The Delta supplies some 23 million Californians with water and helps irrigate millions of acres of farmland. Its ecosystem is in decline, its fisheries are collapsing and we know that an earthquake could dissolve the 150-year-old network of fragile levees, allowing saltwater from San Francisco Bay to contaminate the water supply for much of the state. The issue is important to Silicon Valley, since we rely on the Delta to meet about half our water needs. Our reliance on the Delta is something we have in common with Southern California and the San Joaquin Valley.

Solutions have been mired in political stalemate for too long. Republican and Democratic administrations here and in Washington have been working together for seven years to analyze the merits of various proposed solutions. With a strong federal and state partnership and with strong leadership from Gov. Jerry Brown in place, all we need is a viable plan backed by robust data.

Thankfully, we have one.

The Bay Delta Conservation Plan has been developed through extensive scientific and economic research and hundreds of public meetings. It proposes to construct tunnels to channel water under the

Delta, while at the same time restoring its ecology.

The scale of the plan is impressive, if only because the problem is so big. Once completed, the tunnels would run under the Delta for some 37 miles, transporting water through a seismically active region. In addition, tens of thousands of acres of tidal marsh and other habitat would be restored. Environmentalists, economists, engineers and a host of agencies have been working to address these coequal goals.

State Resources Secretary John Laird released the remaining administrative draft chapters of the plan last week. Such an ambitious plan is important because piecemeal approaches like simply shoring up the Delta levees just won't work. As the recently completed Delta Risk Management Study concludes, upgrading the levees provides no reduction in the seismic risk of failure and flooding.

The Delta plan also won't guarantee access to more water at the expense of the Delta's health. In fact, the amount of water Silicon Valley and other parts of the state will receive should not be much different from what is available today. However, the proposed project will stabilize the Delta and help guarantee supplies.

With anything this big, there are aspects that deserve close scrutiny and adjustment. Accordingly, the plan incorporates changes that have been made in response to concerns. For example, the size of the tunnels and the number of system intakes has decreased 40 percent to help better support the coequal goals. That is exactly how a deliberative process should work.

As currently outlined, the Delta plan will cost $24.5 billion over 50 years. Water users would be responsible for the larger cost of constructing the tunnels, while the public would help pay to restore the ecosystem. While this is considerable, we know that the cost of doing nothing would be far higher.

The members of the Silicon Valley Leadership Group support the Delta plan process because we believe there is a strong business case for the kind of economic and environmental stability the plan would provide.

Andy Ball is president of Suffolk Construction's west region, a member of the California Water Commission and a member of the board of directors of the Silicon Valley Leadership Group. He wrote this for this newspaper.