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## Five Decades of Magical Thinking

### *How California's Water Policy is Founded on a Bankrupt 53-year-old Fantasy*

Recent revelations confirm that California's water policy is founded on a decades-old water deficit, one that will only be compounded by Jerry Brown's Twin Tunnels project—a boondoggle scheme that would attempt to meet unsustainable contractual obligations by draining the Sacramento/San Joaquin Delta of fresh water. The real issue here is not about how water is conveyed; it's about whether there is enough water for more conveyance or storage.

When California officials built the State Water Project in 1960, they knew it would run out of water by 1981. To make up the shortfall, the state over-appropriated water from the Delta. Operation of the Twin Tunnels is predicated on 1960 water availability estimates of anticipated diversions from north state rivers. These diversions from the Middle Fork Eel, the Mad and Van Duzen Rivers did not occur due to their ultimate state and federal designation as Wild and Scenic Rivers.

When it became clear that these rivers could not be impounded, the state should have redrafted existing contracts to reflect the shortfall. Instead, officials responded to the growing crisis on an ad hoc and duplicitous basis, maximizing exports from the Delta on one hand while promoting ineffectual programs for the estuary's preservation on the other—specifically, CALFED and the Delta Plan.

To make this inequitable and environmentally destructive policy permanent and irreversible, the Department of Water Resources simultaneously promoted a massive Delta conveyance system—first the Peripheral Canal, and now the Twin Tunnels.

This tortured—indeed, Orwellian—strategy came to light when Delta water agency attorneys analyzed state documents on water policy. The following excerpt was taken from *Bulletin 76*, a state water report on Delta facilities



Cover of *Bulletin 76*, December 1960. Courtesy of California Department of Water Resources.

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issued in December, 1960:

*“...Full demands on the (state water system) can be met until about 1981 from surplus water in and tributary to the Delta with regulation by the proposed Oroville and San Luis Reservoirs. **However, upstream depletions will reduce the available supplies and water will have to be imported from north coast sources after that year. It is anticipated that coordinated operation (of the State Water Project) and the federal Central Valley Project will afford a limited increase in usable surplus Delta supplies beginning in 1981....Upstream depletions will continue to decrease the available surplus supplies.**”*

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The state has chronically failed to meet its contractual obligations since the 1980s, and the above passage foreshadows the reason: North Coast rivers were not dammed as anticipated, and their water was not sent south.

In a subsequent paragraph, *Bulletin 76* notes:

*The coordinated use of surplus water in and tributary to the Delta and of regulated or imported supplements to this supply, as required, is referred to as **the Delta Pooling Concept. Under this concept of operation the State will ensure a continued supply of water adequate in quantity and quality to meet the needs of export water users. Advantage will be taken of surplus water available in the Delta, and as the demand for water increases and the available surplus supply is reduced by further upstream uses, the State will assume the responsibility of guaranteeing a firm supply of water, which will be accomplished by construction of additional storage facilities and import works. At the same time, the water needs of the Delta will be fully met.***

The “additional storage facilities and import works” alluded to, of course, were never built. And without North Coast river imports via the Sacramento River, the “Delta pooling concept” was completely negated. Still, the state did its utmost to meet its contractual obligations—and it did it by draining the Delta and degrading the estuary’s fisheries and agriculture. It should come as no surprise that this policy made it impossible to ensure that “the water needs of the Delta (were) fully met.”

Currently, exports from the Delta stand at about 5 million acre feet (MAF) per year—*more than twice* the amount that *Bulletin 76* stated could be taken from

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the Delta without the contribution of North Coast rivers.

By contrast, the “no action” alternative of the Bay Delta Conservation Plan yields at best 4.4 MAF annually, while Alternative Four (the preferred alternative of the Brown Administration) would yield between 4.4 and 5.3 MAF per year on average, assuming construction of a three-intake tunnel complex.

What does this mean in lay terms? Simply that the Twin Tunnels project is based on water *already taken off the table*—the “paper water” from north coast rivers that will never be impounded. This project will not provide extra water to the South State, nor will it improve water security.

It will only saddle California ratepayers with up to \$60 billion in debt and assure rapid destruction of the Delta by extracting far more water than the estuary can sustain. It will bankrupt hundreds of Delta family farmers, and it will further threaten the Bay/Delta's imperiled commercial and sport fisheries.

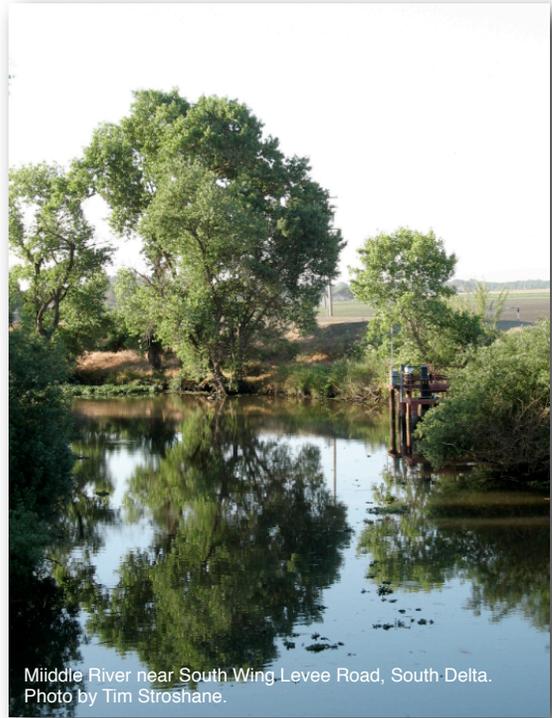
In short, the Twin Tunnels are the most abhorrent of all possible public works projects: an ill-conceived and ruinously expensive scheme that not only will fail to solve the problems they were intended to address, they will force California ratepayers to pay for wholesale destruction of Delta farms and fisheries through skyrocketing water bills. They will bear the burden, receiving no benefits in return.

We can defuse California's water crisis by shifting the emphasis from massive, prohibitively expensive and environmentally disruptive water conveyance projects to a policy that incorporates water conservation, recycling, development of local and regional sources and the retirement of impaired agricultural lands in the western San Joaquin Valley.

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Practical alternatives to the Twin Tunnels project at:

<http://ewccalifornia.org/reports/responsibleexportsplanmay2013.pdf>



Middle River near South Wing Levee Road, South Delta.  
Photo by Tim Strohane.

