

State looking at building tunnels to divert water

By Matt Weiser, Sacramento Bee

On a clear day, it's plain to see why many of California's leading water officials want to get their hands on Peter Stone's property.

From his driveway along the Sacramento River south of Freeport, the view to the east offers a peek at the snow-capped Sierra Nevada. When that snow melts, it flows relentlessly by, just across the levee road from Stone's front windows.

From the state and federal governments' point of view, his 20-acre property in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta is an ideal spot for one of the five large pumping stations they're proposing to feed what may be the largest water tunnel ever contemplated in North America.

Even in a state known for building some of the world's largest waterworks, the plan is audacious. Twin 33-foot-diameter tunnels would carry a portion of the Sacramento River's flow deep under the Delta on a 37-mile path underground to the present head of the California Aqueduct, near Tracy.

Pumps that now serve that aqueduct and its nearby federal counterpart kill millions of fish every year and are blamed for altering the habitat of the estuary itself, once among the world's most productive fisheries.

The tunnel project is intended to move the intakes upstream, to locations presumed to be less harmful to fish and their habitat. It would also secure the freshwater diversions from threats such as earthquakes, floods and sea level rise, ensuring that the 25 million Californians who depend upon that

water do not go without.

Those risks are considered inevitable, so the DWR and its partner water agencies view the project as vital to the state's economy and well-being.

To make it happen, all of those water ratepayers, from the Silicon Valley to San Diego, likely will have to pay higher bills. The project must also survive a maze of potential construction troubles.

Digging a couple of tunnels sounds simple on its face. In reality, the project would turn much of the Delta into a vast construction zone for at least a decade, and permanently industrialize numerous scenic locations that have always been quietly rural.

"This is certainly what we consider a megaproject," said Richard Sanchez, chief of engineering at the California Department of Water Resources, the project's primary sponsor. "And it's something that is certainly several orders of magnitude above what we normally do here in California as far as water projects. It would be a huge undertaking if we move forward."

The tunnel is the centerpiece of the Bay Delta Conservation Plan, an effort to balance water demand and wildlife protection. After three years of often-contentious meetings and innumerable studies, a draft environmental impact report is anticipated later this year.

The DWR is expected to make a formal decision in 2013 on whether to proceed. It would be subject to approval by state and federal wildlife agencies.

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