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Time for the governor to wade into the delta
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Clean, abundant water is something most people take for granted. Yet, with California in its third year of drought, that nonchalance is no longer justified. Across the state, there is a growing consensus that we cannot go on as before, and that we need serious change in the way in which we view and use water. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has taken on some of the fearsome challenges California faces on his watch. But he has yet to meet the water challenge.

The Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta is ground zero in the water debates currently taking place at the state Capitol. The delta provides water for more than 25 million Californians and 3 million acres of agriculture, supporting a \$400 billion economy. But the delta's ecosystem is crashing, portending a water crisis for the entire state.

Schwarzenegger has called for a 20 percent reduction in statewide water use, a notably bold recognition that excessive water use and population increase are doubly threatening to our water future. But he and legislative leaders have not acknowledged that the critical missing ingredient in water management in the delta is governance.

More than two years ago, the governor appointed the Delta Vision Blue Ribbon Task Force, of which I was a member, to develop a plan for an environmentally sustainable delta and a reliable water supply for California. We met for two days a month for two years. We took testimony from water users in the cities, in agriculture, localities in the delta, scientists, academic experts, environmentalists and bureaucrats.

We tried to come to grips with some stunning realities: The delta water's average annual flow is overcommitted to users by more than eight times! Even in the wettest years, the water is overcommitted by three times! The fact that some 200 federal and state agencies share power over governance of water in the delta explains how this grotesque incongruity between realistic supply and entitlement could have come to be.

In addition, potential abuses - like that of the state's Environmental Water Account, where water in Kern County was purchased from the state and then traded back to the account for a higher price - are more prevalent under the current system.

So, the task force proposed an integrated set of recommendations to break the deadlock surrounding water policy in California. Although our work concluded with the release of our Delta Vision Strategic Plan, our commitment continues under the banner of the Delta Vision Foundation.

On Monday, we will come together for a public meeting in Sacramento to announce one of the first products of this new, independent organization: a report card to rate the progress that state policymakers are achieving in resolving the delta's problems. Fair warning: The results are disappointing.

The good news is that the delta is a top priority on the state's legislative agenda. But when we looked at how recent policy proposals compare with the Delta Vision Strategic Plan, there is one serious gap.

The Delta Vision Strategic Plan is a comprehensive and inclusive roadmap for California's water future, and most key stakeholders engaged with water issues around the state are supportive of the plan's recommendations. But without creating a new governance entity for the delta, the center will not hold. The many recommendations aiming both to ensure a reliable water supply for the state and restore the delta ecosystem won't be effective. Our strategic plan recommends a five-member statewide commission appointed by the governor and confirmed by the state Senate. The commission would oversee actions of various state and federal agencies in the delta by requiring consistency with a California Delta Plan, which the commission would develop and adopt.

I watched President George H.W. Bush break a 12-year stalemate on clean air and propose a daring cap-and-trade system with an ambitious goal of taking 10 million tons of sulfur dioxide out of the air, thus solving the acid-rain crisis. Cap-and-trade is now the gold standard for efficient cost-effective pollution control.

Leadership on the creation of a new governing entity for the delta could cut through the cacophony of competing bodies and provide leadership in reforming California's water management. A single, unified governance is the most controversial of our proposals. Governance is the one issue everybody tries to ignore. Achieving it requires brave leadership and heavy lifting. It requires leadership by the governor.

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