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Jerry Meral: Tunnels won't save delta



Chris Kaufman, Associated Press

Exhibit 10

Gov. Jerry Brown was at the Colusa Farm Show in February to pitch his \$14 billion plan to build massive tunnels beneath the delta.

The man who's shepherding Gov. Jerry Brown's plan to build massive water delivery tunnels under the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta is making big waves.

Jerry Meral, deputy secretary at the California Natural Resources Agency, said the tunnel plan - known technically as the Bay Delta Conservation Plan, or BDCP - won't ultimately help the delta.

Problem is that the stated objective of the intensely debated plan is to meet the "co-equal" goals of restoring the vast inland estuary while using its water to irrigate California farmland and quench the thirst of millions. Without the restoration goal, the plan would look like an overt water-grab.

Thus, Meral's comment stunned many.

"BDCP is not about, and has never been about, saving the delta. The delta cannot be saved," Meral told Tom Stokely, a well-known water advocate, in a chat prior to a meeting on the plan that was subsequently reported by Nevada County's Yubanet.com. Stokely and a spokesman for the Natural Resources Agency confirmed to us that the quotation was accurate.

Now, members of Congress who represent the delta counties are calling for Meral's head.

"Director Meral's comments suggest the Brown administration has violated the public trust," Rep. George Miller said in a statement. "He needs to be held accountable for that. And now the administration needs to be forthcoming as to whether they intend to honor their stated goal to restore the region's already struggling habitat, or whether this is simply a water grab which will drive the Bay-Delta to ruin. Based on his comments, deputy director Meral should resign immediately."

Richard Stapler, spokesman for the Natural Resources Agency, cited the context of Meral's statement, saying it was in reference to the 150-plus year outlook for the delta region, with the prospect of sea level rise or a major earthquake.

"We're not asking for his resignation," Stapler said.

Meral, by the way, is not a hired gun. Over the past few years, we've consistently heard people on all sides of this issue say that he is a fair arbiter, though that view appears to have changed.

Stokely said that he was not surprised about the comment, as delta advocates have long harbored suspicions about the real goals of the BDCP, but that Meral was forthcoming in saying it.

"The bottom line for me was that I was just surprised by his candor," Stokely said.

Fight! Fight! Fight! How California funds schools is another topic du jour at the Capitol, and this week the governor smacked Democrats in the Legislature on the issue.

Brown, who is not big on declaring new rights, called it a "matter of equity and civil rights" this week at a press conference with superintendents from throughout the state. He wants school districts to get additional funding based on the number of students who are low-income, who are learning English as a second language, or who are in foster care.

"You can tell from the strong feelings of these superintendents that this is not an ordinary legislative measure, this is a cause. It's a cause for the children of California, and it's a cause for our own future as Californians," Brown said.

He said anybody who challenges him will be in for "the battle of their lives because I'm not going to give up until the last hour."

Democrats in the Legislature appear to have the same goal, but they object to the "concentration factor" that provides additional funding for disadvantaged students, noting that many school districts would not qualify for increased funds even though they have schools with high numbers of students who fall under the governor's metric.

Last call: Lawmakers this week killed a bill by Sen. Mark Leno, D-San Francisco, that would have allowed some bars to stay open until 4 a.m., which happens in cities in 24 other states.

"Given that the vast majority of the developed world already does this, it's not an issue that is going away," Leno said, adding that there's talk of it going to the ballot in 2016.

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