

All We Need is Political Will
By Bruce Babbitt and Douglas Wheeler

Back in 1993 Governor Pete Wilson and President Clinton tasked us, as their resource secretaries, to take on California water issues. The state was in the fifth year of a severe drought, tensions were flaring between northern California (where the water is) and southern California (where the people are). And out in the Central Valley, farmers, fearing reduced water deliveries to save Delta fisheries, were clamoring for repeal of environmental laws.

We began this unpromising assignment with a bipartisan message from our superiors, a Democratic president and a Republican governor-- the era of big water projects was over, unlikely to return. It was time to invent new ways of storing, using and conserving water. We would have to set aside our differences and learn to work together, public and private, state, federal and local. We then invited the parties to talk. Within a year we had our first success, an agreement called the Bay Delta Accord, designed to assure minimum flows through the California Delta for fishery protection.

Then we expanded the process by inviting water users and government agencies throughout the state to join in a roundtable process that became known by the clunky phrase, CalFed. That process stretched out for five years, culminating in 2000 when a new Governor, Gray Davis, joining with federal officials to outline a comprehensive state water plan and partnership. Peace, it seemed, was at hand, aided by the return of normal rainfall.

Today, however, the Cal Fed process is faltering. Old antagonisms between farmers, cities and environmentalists are once again bubbling to the surface. Congressional funding is not meeting projected levels and future state revenues are uncertain. Parts of the plan are way behind schedule, including new water storage facilities and rehabilitation of the aging levee system that protects lands in the delta region between San Francisco and Sacramento.

And once again, a new Governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, must decide the fate of CalFed and the state water plan. Understandably, he has not yet laid out a detailed plan of action. Meanwhile he has requested the Little Hoover Commission, a state watchdog agency, assess the entire program in all its complexity, beginning with a hearing in Sacramento on August 25.

The Commission will hear testimony to the considerable achievements of CalFed. In the Delta an innovative water marketing plan enables fishery managers to plan and purchase water for fish passage without disrupting agricultural water deliveries. Throughout the state water banks and increased groundwater storage are providing assurance against dry years.

Streams and rivers are being restored. Programs are underway to improve the quality of water withdrawn from the Delta for municipal use. Conservation and efficiency

improvements, both on the farm and in the city are delivering real water savings. The Central Valley Project and the State Water Project are coordinating operations to yield more water with less environmental damage.

The Commission will also hear that much remains to be done. The Bay-Delta Authority, an agency created by the Legislature to oversee CalFed, has proposed a 10-year \$20 billion program to get the job done. There is no chance that this sum can be obtained from state general revenue sources. So we must also find new ways to cobble together federal funding, user fees, revenue bonding and general funds.

The concept of “user pays” makes sense. Farmers should pay a larger share of the true cost of assuring their water supplies. Cities should finance the cost of efficiency programs, and measures to guarantee drinking water quality. Of course it will not be easy; benefits are hard to quantify and there is no exact science to tell us what percentage of the cost should borne by the general public.

The choices may not be easy, but it is essential that the Governor and the Legislature make them soon. Conservative population projections inform us that California needs to provide water adequate for a growing economy that will include another 25 million residents by mid-century. We have a plan and we have the resources. All we need now is the political will to move forward.

Mr. Babbitt was Secretary of Interior for President Bill Clinton and Mr. Wheeler was Secretary of Resources for Governor Pete Wilson.