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Balance California's Water Use

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In the wake of last week's election, the challenge for Sacramento's new leaders is to solve one of the state's most persistent dilemmas: successfully managing California's water supplies while preserving our natural heritage.

It will require righting decades of environmental degradation, while also providing steady and sustainable supplies of water to our farms and cities. The federal government is an active partner in this search for a solution, both as the owner of the Central Valley Project, one of the largest reclamation projects nationwide, and as a lead protector of endangered species.

Gov.-elect Jerry Brown and other new elected officials enter office just as California's water supply system and the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta Bay-Delta ecosystem are at a major crossroads. California's wild salmon populations are in serious danger of extinction, and our fishing industries have been decimated. The San Francisco Bay-Delta is the largest and most biologically important estuary on the West Coast, home to hundreds of different species of fish, birds and other wildlife. It also is in a death spiral.

Last year's passage of historic water reform legislation

created a road map for California to develop balanced solutions for the bay-delta. The new law recognized a shared responsibility to improve the reliability of water supplies for both Central Valley farms and cities statewide within the ecological limits of the bay-delta. A healthy ecosystem and reliable water supply are inextricably linked. Here a few guide posts from the law for Brown as he shapes his water legacy:

1. Ensure the freshwater flows necessary to support a restored and thriving bay-delta.

2. Commit to grounding water policy based on existing peer-reviewed science. The state Water Resources Control Board and Department of Fish and Game recently synthesized this information and recommended the amount and timing of water needed for a healthy ecosystem and sustainable salmon populations.

3. Implement the new state policy to reduce our reliance on the delta for our water supply. We can do this through economic incentives and strategic investments in alternatives like conservation, recycling and groundwater supplies.

4. Improve water use efficiency by encouraging the transfer of water from willing sellers to cities and farms that can use additional supplies. The state should facilitate

but not control the market, except to ensure that transfers do not result in environmental harm or adversely affect other water users.

5. Determine if new water delivery infrastructure can be both environmentally beneficial and economically rational.

These combined five actions will reduce long-standing conflicts between water supply reliability and ecosystem health. California has abundant water resources, but we need a much smarter approach to balancing the water needs of native fisheries, healthy rivers and bays with the needs of farms, cities and people. Brown has the opportunity to build on the work of the outgoing administration, work with federal partners and help develop a sustainable bay-delta solution for current and future generations of Californians.

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