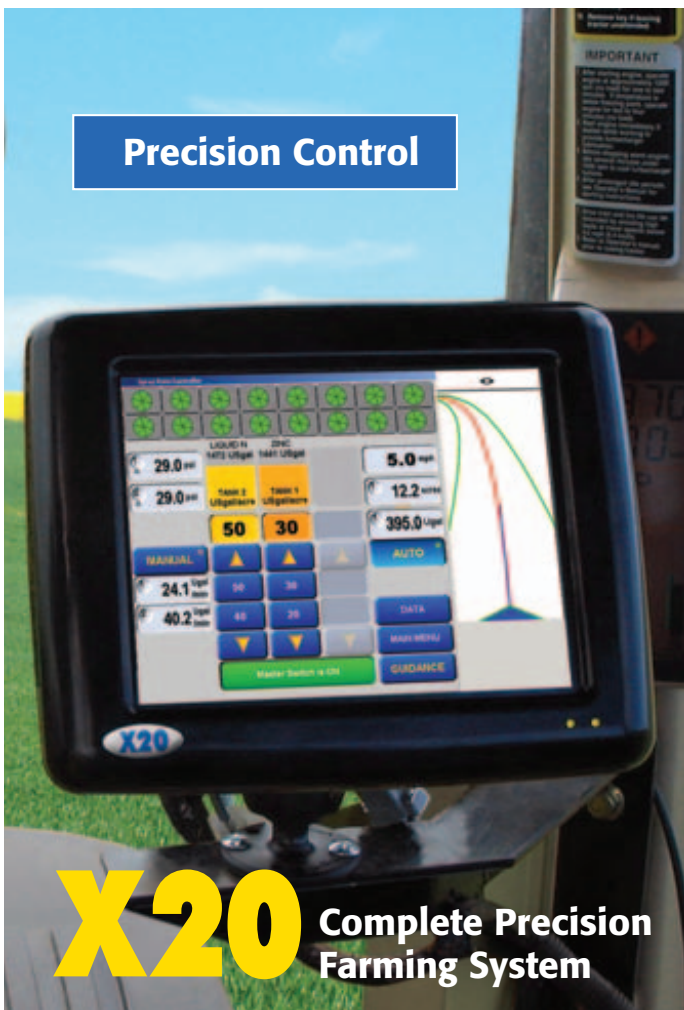


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EDITORIALLY SPEAKING



Time to rethink water solutions

WHEN irate readers call to tell me that one of my editorials is off base or counter to their long-held beliefs, the response is always the same: "I didn't say I was right. I only wanted to make you think." And therein lies our common problem: Agriculture often defends a long-dug rut without entertaining new ideas and thinking. Success always comes from challenging ourselves.

That explains our enthusiasm about the report "Envisioning Futures for the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta," which is covered on pages 1 and 8. It is new thinking, a fresh breath of ideas on solving the Delta's problems.

Learn from mistakes

While, as pointed out, this magazine has a long and fruitless history of supporting Delta solutions, like our readers we have fallen into a rut. Since we have always championed the common good, CalFed, the decade-old truce between water users and environment groups, appealed to our strongly held beliefs.

That trust was shattered when the idea that "everyone would get better together" came unglued with proposals to increase Delta exports. This was followed in 2004 with the realization that the stability of the levee systems and the protection of native fish were failing. Worse, to solve these problems, CalFed needed to throw more money (\$8 billion) at the problem.

Upshot: In hindsight, CalFed was a self-sustaining money machine and not a solution. Hey, all of us can be seduced by clinging tightly to ideology as an excuse for not thinking.

That is not to say that CalFed shouldn't be part of a long-term Delta solution. It probably should. But like the rest of us, CalFed needs to learn from its mistakes. While everyone in CalFed talked common good, there was no common financial support. This lopsided dollar support contributed to the failure. California covered 41% of the total financial expenditures in the first four years, compared with only 10% by the federal government. The Feds talked the talk but didn't walk the walk, as is often the case.

Naturally, and we hope this isn't our ideology run amok, the idea of a fluctuating Delta that includes baby peripheral canal solutions is worth considering.

While not new, a federal wildlife agency concluded in the 1990s that this was the best wildlife solution. It would result in cleaner water because the canal would take water upstream near Sacramento. The fluctuating option considers metering flows into the Delta from various locations, and delivers water right to the pumping station, thus preventing the San Joaquin River from running backward because of the power of the pumps, as the Chicago River does.

Need fix for state water system

While we applaud and appreciate this new Delta thinking, we believe this is only a bold baby step. What is needed is new thinking about the entire California water system, from building new dams to solving the Westlands Water Districts salt-tainted farmland drainage.

We say this because we keep dodging bullets — everything from recent earthquakes within driving distance of the Delta to a snowpack that was only 19% of normal on Jan 1. Yes, the snowpack has come back to 83% of average as of March 1, but there is no guarantee that the state will receive another March miracle as we have in past dry winters.

Finally, we believe new dams are part of the solution, as is underground storage. The governor is on the right track with his Delta Vision Task Force. Also needed is a credible, scientific study about how to solve state water-system problems, from dams (what, where and how many) to reviewing the federal government's proposed Westlands water deal that would forgive \$490 million in debt in return for turning the problem over to farmers to solve.

These Delta options should pump in new thinking for water-system solutions while siphoning off the quick-draw urge for water wars.



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