

Agency overseeing CalFed recommends it's own elimination

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The state agency created to safeguard the San Joaquin-Sacramento River Delta's environment and make sure that farmers and urban consumers get the water they need voted Tuesday to recommend its own elimination.

The California Bay-Delta Authority was created in 2003 with the goal of getting the 25 state and federal agencies that make up the CalFed Bay Delta Program to work together, and meet the needs of clashing groups of farmers, environmentalists, fishermen and others with a stake in the waters of the delta.

CalFed faced challenges from the start, caught between its conflicting goals of serving the environment and water consumers. In May, the governor ordered independent reviews of the program following threats by state lawmakers to cut part of the program's budget.

The Little Hoover Commission, a government-appointed body tasked with reviewing the Bay-Delta Authority, recommended last month that the agency should be eliminated and substituted with a new oversight body made up of public officials appointed by executive and legislative representatives.

Part of the problem, the Little Hoover report said, was that many of the members of the Bay-Delta Authority were top officials in the same agencies they were supposed to oversee.

The Bay-Delta Authority's 24-person board agreed, adopting the commission's recommendation as part of an operating framework for the next 10 years.

"The Authority recommended putting itself out of business, and recommended a better oversight mechanism," said CalFed spokesman Keith Coolidge. "It's a big deal."

The framework adopted also included calls for improved fiscal accountability, greater use of science in the agency's decision-making, and the establishment of a long-term plan to help restore endangered species in the delta, Coolidge said.

But environmentalists attending the meeting were not impressed, and said they would believe that the agency would be responsive to the public when they saw it happen.

"That's supposedly what they're working on, but it isn't certain that that's what they're going to do," said LaDonna Williams, with People for Children's Health and Environmental Justice. "It's time to stop talking about it and just do it."

The Authority will now pass their recommended framework to the state Secretary of Resources. He will develop a 10-year plan incorporating all recommendations for improving CalFed, and deliver it to the governor by January, Coolidge said. #

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