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Delta tunnels — a stunner from top aide

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,"

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Chris Kaufman / Marysville Appeal-Democrat

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

Stunner on delta tunnels

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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 earth-

quake.

"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