Committee on Resources
Subcommittee on Water & Power

Witness Statement

Testimony of
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Regarding Steps to Improve Central Valley Project
Water Supply Reliability and Water Quality

Before the

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Committee on Resources
Subcommittee on Water and Power Resources

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Mr. Chairman, members of the Subcommittee, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. My name is Grant Davis. I am Executive Director of The Bay Institute of San Francisco, (TBI) a non profit organization dedicated to protecting and restoring the ecosystems of San Francisco Bay and its Delta-Central Valley watershed.

TBI was deeply involved in the development of the Central Valley Project Improvement Act (CVPIA) and one of the three environmental organizations to sign the Bay-Delta Accord. We have been active over the years in efforts to implement innovative new approaches to managing California's water supply represented in these initiatives. Our concern in doing so has been to reverse over a century of destruction of the Bay-Delta environment – a trend that has worsened catastrophically over the last two decades – while maintaining the economic and social benefits derived from managing the state's water supplies for multiple uses.

Periodically, a crisis is proclaimed in the ability of the Central Valley Project (CVP) to make deliveries to its customers, and extreme solutions proposed to solve this crisis, everything from refusing to enforce state and federally mandated protections for the environment to building expensive and environmentally questionable new facilities. I would like to address two issues regarding the CVP's need for improved water supply reliability and water quality. First, is there a crisis in the CVP? Second, what tools are available now to improve how the CVP manages water supplies?
Is there a crisis?

Most water users in the Central Valley are unaffected by the issues of concern raised by the Committee in today's hearing. Levels of diversion and export of water from the Bay-Delta system for the CVP and other

water suppliers remain at all-time highs, as do the revenues generated by water use. The issues of concern being raised here really apply to two water districts, the Santa Clara Valley Water District and the Westlands Water District.

It is important to understand what is really at stake for these two districts. The issue for Santa Clara and Westlands is not whether they will receive and manage an adequate water supply for their customers. These districts receive water from a variety of sources. In addition to CVP supplies, Santa Clara also uses water from the State Water Project (SWP), the Tuolumne River, local groundwater supplies, and water transfers. Westlands is an active player in the water market, and routinely purchases or exchanges large quantities of water from other water districts.

What is at stake is the degree to which these districts use CVP-derived water supplies -- traditionally one of the cheapest sources of water – as opposed to the many other sources of water available to them. In fact, Santa Clara has increased its use of local and SWP sources when CVP deliveries are reduced, and Westlands has been purchasing hundreds of thousands of acre-feet of water on the market every year to offset changes in CVP deliveries. We applaud the creativity of these districts in looking to varied sources of water as perhaps the most important component of securing a reliable and high quality water supply.

As part of my testimony, I have included a chart that demonstrates the increase in CVP exports since the Tracy pumping plant began operation in the early 1950's. The comparison shows that the projected export level of 2.68
MAF in 2000, even under the fishery measures pursuant to the Bay-Delta Accord, the CVPIA and protective measures for endangered species, will still be at a comparatively high level - higher than average over the last 20 years.

What tools are available now to improve how the CVP manages water supplies?

The ability to more creatively manage water supplies from a variety of sources is not limited to the approaches currently employed by Santa Clara and Westlands. There are a number of important, underutilized tools available now or in the near future to improve even further the reliability and quality of CVP water supplies, including:

* improving irrigation efficiency and the amount potentially available for transfer;

* increasing access to groundwater storage and conjunctive use of surface and groundwater supplies;

* purchasing drainage-impacted lands from willing sellers; and,

* using an Environmental Water Account to protect fish species of concern from Delta pumping while minimizing impacts to water project operations.

Let's begin by looking at improved irrigation efficiency. Currently irrecoverable losses from evaporation in irrigated fields runs as high as 9 percent on fields using sprinkler systems and as high as 30 percent on fields using flood irrigation. Reducing evaporation by even a few percent could generate from half a million to two million acre-feet of water savings. Much of that water would be available for transfer to districts like Santa Clara and Westlands seeking to supplement their contract delivery sources.

To exploit this potential and promote a higher level of irrigation efficiency, the state-federal CALFED Program has developed a new program of loans and grants to agricultural water suppliers, managers and users to fund improvements in agricultural water management practices.

Next, there is what should be California's largest reservoir system, its aquifers. Unfortunately, over the years the state of California has not demonstrated leadership in promoting the use of the millions of acre-feet of potential storage in Central Valley groundwater basins, preferring instead to increase its reliance on more environmentally damaging imported surface water supplies. Recently, however, there is a growing interest on the part of water managers, water users, and policy makers in exploring a more comprehensive approach to measuring and managing groundwater use to tap this potential. This interest should be strongly encouraged. Even conservative estimates of the potential for groundwater supplies are huge. The CVP's own studies of groundwater recharge programs performed for the CVPIA Least Cost Yield Plan estimated a potential for nearly a million additional acre-feet of annual yield from groundwater sources.

Third, there are about half a million acres of lands on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley that will experience significant drainage problems over the next forty years and likely contribute to very serious drainage-induced water quality impacts to Central Valley fish and wildlife populations. The state and federal governments have long agreed on the need to retire the most severely affected of these lands by purchasing them from willing sellers. Solving the water quality and soil drainage problems contributes to water supply reliability. Voluntary land retirement of the 75,000 acres identified by the San Joaquin Valley Drainage Program could generate hundreds of thousands of acre-feet of additional water. The CVPIA land retirement program and the state's matching efforts need to be stepped up to begin to achieve the conservative but long-delayed targets set by the Drainage Program.

Finally, the establishment of new environmental assets, like CALFED's proposed Environmental Water Account, present exciting opportunities to create more reliable water supplies for all purposes, instream and offstream. Increasing the ability to store water for environmental purposes in existing federal and state reservoirs or in new groundwater programs will allow resource managers concerned with restoring the Bay-Delta ecosystem to improve protections beyond the levels provided under the CVPIA and Accord while minimizing impacts to water users.

For instance, water managers could draw on these new environmental water supplies to increase flows or reduce pumping when conditions of high risk to fish species of concern are experienced.

As I stated previously, we do not believe there is really a crisis in the CVP. But the crisis mentality will persist -- and the tensions that exist between competing users of water will be exacerbated -- if we do not more actively promote the tools available to more creatively manage the CVP's and California's water supplies. We urge the Committee to help foster this spirit of creativity by supporting and promoting measures to improve agricultural water use efficiency, increase groundwater banking and conjunctive use, create water savings from retiring drainage problem lands, and establish new environmental water assets.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my remarks. Thank you again for the opportunity to provide these comments. I would be happy to answer any questions at the appropriate time.

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