INTRODUCTION

The Delta is the heart of California’s interconnected water system—home for productive agriculture, numerous small communities, and recreation for the adjacent urban areas of Sacramento, Stockton, and the East Bay, a place of diversion for much of the state’s urban and agricultural water use, the recipient of flows and pollutants from upstream events and activities, the habitat and migratory route for fish and wildlife, and the conduit for freshwater flows to San Francisco Bay. Thus, the Governor’s proposed water resilience portfolio must successfully integrate actions that significantly improve the severely degraded Delta ecosystem and its outdated infrastructure, while honoring the Delta as an evolving place.

The overarching recommendation of the Delta sub-group is that the State should strive for workable solutions through processes that are inclusive, transparent, open and integrated throughout the Delta watershed and areas served by water diverted from the Delta, from the headwaters to the ocean. A successful process will fully engage the agencies represented on the Delta Plan Interagency Implementation Committee, local agencies, non-governmental organizations, and other stakeholders. A process that merely “warms over” prior proposals will lack credibility and revive entrenched opposition that has stalled progress in the Delta for more than a generation.

Having received input and insight from a wide range of Delta stakeholders, the Delta sub-group offers specific recommendations in three areas where we believe consensus is within realistic reach. We urge the Governor to include the following actions in the State’s resilient water portfolio.

ENHANCE FLOOD AND CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION FOR THE DELTA

29. Climate change is expected to have substantial effects on the sustainability and resilience of the Delta—sea level rise, storm surge, increased flood flows in wet periods, decreased inflows in droughts. In the next four years, the administration could make substantial progress on addressing vulnerabilities in the Delta that affect people, the regional economy, and critical water supplies and infrastructure for much of the state. The Newsom administration should take decisive action in the next four years to halt and reverse subsidence, address Delta vulnerability to drought and flood, and increase investment in flood protection for people, infrastructure, and lands in the Delta. Specifically, the Newsom administration should implement the following:

1. Subsidence is widely recognized as one of the most significant threats to the Delta. State landowners should be directed to adopt practices that stop subsidence. The State should provide financial and technical assistance to other public and private landowners who choose to adopt
practices that can reduce and reverse subsidence and associated carbon emissions. The State should collect and analyze data from implementing best management practices to reduce subsidence and increase carbon sequestration to inform climate change adaptation efforts in the Delta.

2. [THIS ITEM IS EMPHASIZED FOR COMMISSION ../Start Emphasis] Direct the State Water Resources Control Board to inventory water available under the existing water rights priority system, including accounting for unmet environmental needs, recognizing volatility in amount, timing and quality. [...] [End Emphasis]

3. [THIS ITEM IS EMPHASIZED FOR COMMISSION ../Start Emphasis] Acknowledge that chronic shortages, particularly among south-of-Delta agriculture, may worsen as a result of Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA) implementation as well as climate change, and empower affected regions to plan for addressing those shortages (including flood capture, reservoir reoperation, and groundwater recharge). [...] [End Emphasis]

4. Prioritize Central Valley flood system management [including increased and sustained attention to the levee system in the Delta] by building on existing levee maintenance and subvention programs, adopting levee standards, increasing funding, and establishing a timeline for attaining the standards throughout the system to protect vulnerable people, infrastructure, property, and water quality.

5. Listen respectfully to Delta constituents about the Delta as an evolving place in light of threats from climate change and respond with appropriate protection and adaptation strategies.

6. Conduct a credible, multi-agency effort to fairly and honestly assess the Bay-Delta’s vulnerability to climate change and to develop realistic adaptation strategies.

DEVELOP INTEGRATED OUTCOMES FOR THE DELTA AND THE WATER RESILIENCE PORTFOLIO

30. Actions to address the challenges in the Delta must remain connected to and coordinated with water resilience initiatives in the Delta watershed and in areas served by water supplies diverted from the Delta and its tributaries. The (re)consideration of Delta conveyance ([THIS PARENTHETICAL IS EMPHASIZED FOR COMMISSION ../Start Emphasis] both existing conveyance in Delta channels and proposals for isolated conveyance under or around the Delta [...] [End Emphasis]) should be closely integrated with planning and implementation of water resilience portfolio actions outside and within the Delta. That is, the State should assess and report on what is achievable to increase wet year water capture (storage, enhanced floodplains, groundwater recharge, etc.) and reduce water demand (conservation, recycling, desalination, etc.). Specifically, the Newsom administration should implement the following:

1. Recognize and plan for extreme volatility of Delta water supplies, considering annual, seasonal, and even daily volatility.

2. [THIS ITEM IS EMPHASIZED FOR COMMISSION ../Start Emphasis] Direct the Department of Water Resources to credibly plan to carry out the “big gulp/little sip” strategy among areas dependent on the Delta for a portion of their water supplies by amending urban and agricultural water management plan directives to withstand at least three consecutive years of minimum (“health & safety”) summer exports from the Delta while maintaining minimum environmental flows. [...] [End Emphasis]

3. [THIS ITEM IS EMPHASIZED FOR COMMISSION ../Start Emphasis] Require regions dependent on the Delta for a portion of their water supplies to incorporate and plan for such minimum exports from the Delta during the June through September period for at least three consecutive drought years within a ten-year planning horizon and for four consecutive drought years within a 25-year planning horizon. [...] [End Emphasis]
4. Assure that the updated Bay-Delta Water Quality Control Plan (as well as any voluntary agreements that effectively meet rigorous water quality objectives) provide funding and other incentives for implementation, maintenance, and adaptive management.

5. Demand an honest, open, and transparent consideration of a robust set of infrastructure alternatives (including intake locations, diversion controls, storage facilities, and climate change protections), while acknowledging the necessity of continued reliance on through-Delta conveyance to meet the co-equal goals and maintain Delta water quality.

ECOSYSTEM/WILDLIFE STRATEGY

31. Restoring the Delta ecosystem is one of the co-equal goals for the Delta. Chapter 4 of the Delta Plan establishes goals and targets for restoration. The EcoRestore program has initiated more than a dozen restoration projects within the Delta. The Water Resilience Portfolio should describe an integrated multi-objective planning structure to achieve Delta landscape and habitat benchmarks through existing programs: Yolo Bypass, Paradise Cut, Delta Conservancy Public Lands Strategy, North Delta, and Suisun Marsh. Specifically, the Newsom administration should implement the following:

1. Adopt integrated, multi-benefit, multi-stakeholder, multi-funder landscape-scale processes for reconciling the existing highly altered Delta with a functioning ecosystem. Models for integration include the Yolo Bypass Partnership, the Suisun Marsh Habitat Restoration and Management Plan, the Department of Fish & Wildlife Delta Conservation Framework and, potentially, the conceptual Paradise Cut flood control, habitat restoration, and water supply project. These processes, while time-consuming, have a better chance of garnering the support needed for implementation than piecemeal “mitigation” projects.

2. Use pilot restoration projects on both public and private lands to “learn before launch” of a broader Delta-wide restoration strategy.

3. Involve Delta landowners and residents in planning for integrated, multi-benefit restoration projects to assure both integrated design and community support.

4. [THIS ITEM IS EMPHASIZED FOR COMMISSION ../Start Emphasis] Consider and address potential impacts of restoration actions, such as water quality, hydrology, transportation, and agricultural operations. [../End Emphasis]

5. Integrate “good neighbor” strategies in all restoration projects.

6. Develop a restoration funding strategy that explicitly values ecosystem services and identifies the beneficiaries who can help to pay for them.

7. To the extent that private lands are used to carry out restoration strategies, employ a measured, funded project solicitation process for land acquisition and project implementation.

8. Focus on broader Delta ecosystem health and sustainability as the appropriate measure of success while incorporating Endangered Species Act (ESA) protections.

9. Respond to the accelerating deterioration of the southern Delta with a robust, multi-benefit channel maintenance program to improve ecosystem function, flood control, water quality and water supply.

10. Use science-based processes, such as the San Francisco Estuary Institute’s Delta Renewed report, to generate consistent and integrated reconciliation strategies.