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Editorial: Steinberg should protect the Delta

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That ominous sound you hear coming from the Capitol this week is the rumble of water buffaloes stampeding toward a possible deal to keep Northern California water flowing to farms, businesses and homes in the south. We understand the Legislature's new-found sense of urgency on this issue, but we're concerned that the interests of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta will get trampled in the process.

The legislation is a moving target, and it's impossible to know how it will turn out. But a couple of hints give us pause.

First, there's only one seat on the proposed seven-member Delta Stewardship Council for a representative from the five Delta counties. The council, if it's created, will have tremendous power to decide the region's future, up to and including whether a massive new canal should be built to route water through or around the Delta.

This is a big state, but it seems to us that more local representation on such a body would be prudent.

Second, only one lawmaker representing the Delta was among the 14 members appointed by legislative leaders to negotiate this package. Presumably, this is because those legislators cannot be counted on to back a bill that doesn't protect the Delta.

The one member from these parts is Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg, the Democrat from Sacramento. But Steinberg, has divided loyalties, because he was elected leader by and must be responsive to the needs of all the Democrats in his house, not just those from the Delta.

In addition to assurances that any new governing body will give the Delta counties an adequate voice at the table, the counties need protections for their water supply and its quality, and guarantees that the financing needed to repair and maintain the Delta as water is shunted south will be sufficient to meet the need.

Steinberg understandably wants to chalk up a major legislative achievement in his first year as leader. We wish him well. But that drive shouldn't blind him to the needs of his own constituents.

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