



The Sacramento Bee

Southern California deal for Delta islands could cost up to \$240 million

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Southern California's most powerful water agency could spend as much as \$240 million to buy a cluster of islands in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, a move that has stirred accusations of a south state water grab.

The board of the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California voted Tuesday to authorize its general manager to negotiate options on the five islands, owned by a Swiss company called Delta Wetlands Properties. It would mark the first time Metropolitan has directly attempted to purchase land in the Delta, which serves as the hub of California's complicated man-made water-delivery network.

The price is still under negotiation but, based on prevailing Delta land values, could be between \$7,500 to \$12,000 an acre, said Metropolitan general manager Jeff Kightlinger. That would put the total price for the 20,000-acre purchase at somewhere between \$150 million and \$240 million.

Metropolitan and three agricultural water agencies from Kern County – Semitropic, Rosedale-Rio Bravo and Wheeler Ridge-Maricopa – have been discussing purchasing the five islands for several weeks. In his first extensive comments on the Delta land plan since it surfaced weeks ago, Kightlinger told reporters that Metropolitan is waiting for the boards of the Kern agencies to authorize the purchase options.

Critics have said Metropolitan and its partners want to use the lands to somehow pull more water out of the Delta. Kightlinger and Stephen Arakawa, Metropolitan's director of Bay-Delta initiatives, acknowledged that more water is Metropolitan's goal, but not in the way the agency's opponents think. Instead, Metropolitan's plan is to restore wildlife habitats on the islands, on the theory that any project that enhances the Delta's ecosystems would smooth the way for improved water deliveries. Over the years, water deliveries to Southern California farms and cities have been vastly curtailed at times to protect endangered fish species.

"Our interest is reliable (water) supply, and a healthy environment in the Delta is a key part of that," Arakawa said. "You can't have a reliable supply without a healthy environment."

Environmental groups remain skeptical. "Can you say the words 'Owens Valley' and 'Chinatown'? It certainly has that odor," said Ron Stork, policy director for Friends of the River. "One way to deal with the opposition of folks in the Delta is to buy the Delta."

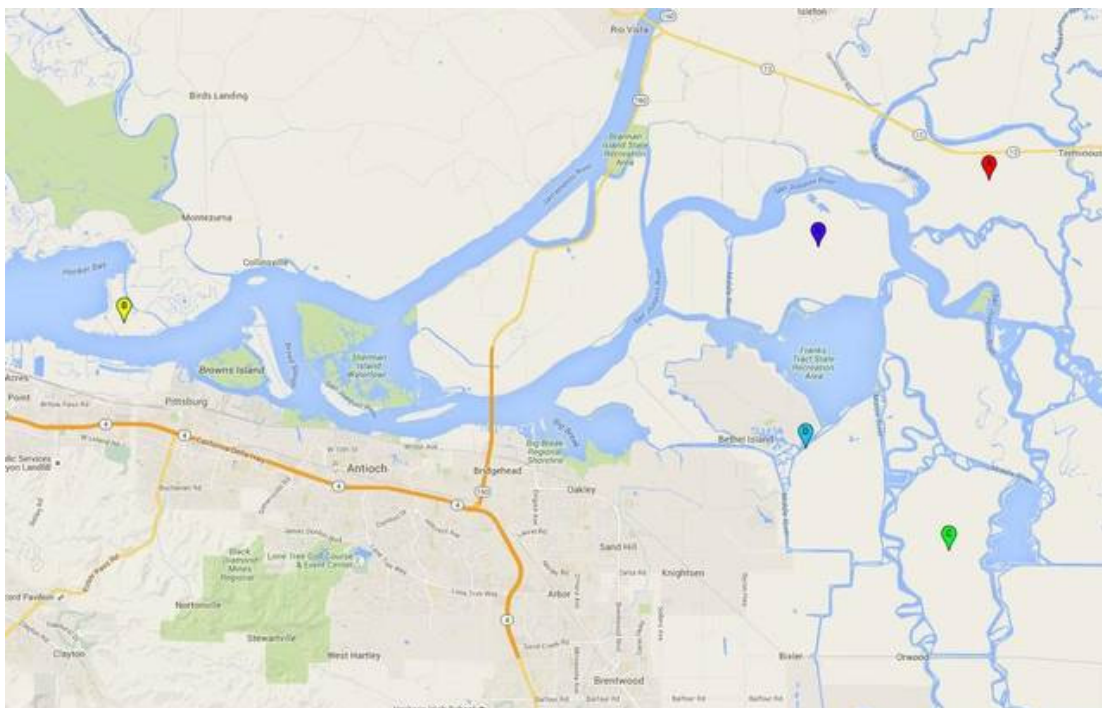
Kightlinger said ownership of the islands also could help Metropolitan and its allies push ahead with the Delta tunnels project, known as California WaterFix, a controversial \$15.5 billion plan spearheaded by Gov. Jerry Brown to re-engineer the Delta and enhance reliability of water deliveries to Metropolitan and San Joaquin Valley agricultural water agencies.

Two of the islands to be purchased sit along the proposed tunnels route, and owning them would mean fewer eminent-domain proceedings to get the tunnels project going, Kightlinger said. He added that the islands also could be used to store dirt as excavation proceeds for the tunnels.

Delta Wetlands Properties' owner, the U.S. subsidiary of Zurich Insurance Group, has been trying for 20 years to convert the islands into reservoirs as a means of storing additional water for customers south of the Delta. The islands sit below sea level and could store up to 70 billion gallons during wet years. Kightlinger said Metropolitan isn't especially interested in the reservoir plan.

Officials with Delta Wetlands couldn't be reached for comment Tuesday. The purchase would include Bouladin Island, Bacon Island, Webb Tract, most of Holland Island and a portion of tiny Chipps Island, a total of more than 20,000 acres.

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