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LA is deceiving itself if it thinks it doesn't need delta tunnels

By Joe Mathews | March 29, 2018 | Updated: March 30, 2018 7:30pm

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Photo: Rich Pedroncelli, AP

A sign opposing a proposed tunnel plan to ship water through the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta to Southern California is displayed near Freeport.

“Chinatown” is fooling itself.

Los Angeles has a long history of water deceptions, a point made famously by Roman Polanski's 1974 film. But the huge self-sabotage of the city's latest scheme is a real doozy. L.A. has convinced itself of the hokum that it has all the water it needs.

Let me be clear: L.A. must produce more of its own water for its long-term security. And leading Angelenos are right to ramp up storm water capture, groundwater cleanup, recycling and conservation so that more Los Angeles water is local.

But the idea now being sold by elites — that Los Angeles can become completely self-sufficient on water — is a fantasy. Producing more local water is so costly that L.A. would be fortunate to get half of its water from local sources.

Which makes L.A.'s current deluge of self-deception dangerous. Leading Angelenos are broadcasting their self-sufficiency message at a moment when the state is debating a vital plan to shore up a crucial piece of the region's water supply: the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.

That proposal, estimated to cost anywhere from \$10 billion to \$30 billion, would construct one or two tunnels to carry Sacramento River water south, thus providing more certainty about the 30 percent of L.A. water that now runs through the delta.

The project should be a no-brainer for L.A. But L.A. isn't thinking clearly on water. Instead, the city, under Mayor Eric Garcetti — a smooth-talking optimist full of plans and presidential ambition — believes it can make transformational changes without much trouble.

Such triumphalism is rooted in the city's winning streak: securing the 2028 Olympic Games, rebuilding its schools, reviving South L.A., transforming downtown into a true center, and expanding transit.

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Water is different. But in a triumphalist Los Angeles Daily News opinion piece, Garcetti framed his drive for water self-sufficiency as a “Mulholland moment,” a strange choice given that William Mulholland ushered in water imports that Garcetti now rejects.

From there, the mayor went off the deep end, blasting the delta tunnels as somehow detrimental to the dream of L.A. self-sufficiency, writing: “We will never be able to solve our water needs if we have tunnel vision.” Finally, he wrote of a city that gets 70 percent-plus of its water from elsewhere: “I’m often asked if we have enough water in Los Angeles for our future. And I always answer that we have plenty of water.”

Garcetti isn’t alone in his hubris. The Los Angeles City Council just voted to oppose the tunnels if they don’t meet certain conditions. That vote reflects fears of local environmental and consumer groups that use the myth of self-sufficiency to oppose the tunnels. They have demanded the firing of the L.A. Department of Water and Power’s ratepayer advocate for the crime of saying that L.A. could afford the water that the delta tunnels would bring.

Of course, interest groups and politicians aren’t the only Angelenos selling fantasies of self-sufficiency. UCLA has issued a Grand Challenge that includes many smart ideas for creating more local water, but also promotes the self-sufficiency myth, setting the goal of transitioning Los Angeles County to “100 percent local water” by 2050. The challenge’s leader, the environmentalist Mark Gold, embraced the madness with a Los Angeles Times piece, titled “Let’s Go Local on Water,” and touting “complete water self-sufficiency.”

Gold, at least, acknowledged that such a transition would be extremely costly. Those who oppose the delta tunnels love to talk about the project's high sticker price and how it would get passed on to ratepayers. But the truth is that delta water via the tunnels would be far cheaper than all the expensive new infrastructure needed to make L.A.'s water more local.

And the tunnels are a real project. L.A.'s various sustainability plans don't explain how to pay the costs of producing more local water. They also ignore the reality that L.A.'s water is becoming less local. The 2012-16 drought increased L.A.'s reliance on water imports, particularly from the delta and the Colorado River. The combination of that greater dependence on imports — and L.A.'s statements of self-sufficiency — is dangerous. Why should other parts of the state send water to us, if our leaders say we don't need it?

So, my fellow Californians, I hereby apologize for Angelenos' ingratitude for the water that comes from your communities to ours. I wish I could promise you that we Angelenos will cool the self-sufficiency rhetoric while the state is debating the tunnels.

But c'mon, Jake, you know what town this is.

Joe Mathews writes the [Connecting California](#) column for [Zócalo Public Square](#). To comment, submit your letter to the editor at [SFChronicle.com/letters](#).



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