Nonprofit organizations gaining influence

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At a recent workshop sponsored by the Bay Area Economic Forum, a distinguished group of Bay Area business executives tackled the question: where will civic leadership for the Bay Area come from in the next millennium? In decades past, major statewide and regional projects such as UC, the State Water Project and Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) had moved rapidly from concept to fruition largely due to the efforts of a small group of California business executives, usually the heads of large, regionally based corporations.

Today, however, regional business leadership is less civic-minded, often controlled from out-of-state (Bank of America, Southwestern Bell), scrambling to meet new industry challenges (PG&E, Levi-Strauss), or simply too new to establish a role in regional decision-making (Oracle, Yahoo).

For most of those present at the workshop, this was a matter of considerable concern. California’s infrastructure is aging and has not expanded in recent years. The consensus view was that prospects were bleak to meet the population, environmental and demographic changes predicted for California in the coming decades.

One presenter, however, offered a surprisingly optimistic countervailing viewpoint. The United States, he noted, is the world leader in nonprofit voluntary associations. These organizations, many of which are now frequently identified by their Internal Revenue Service designation “501(c)(3),” are more prevalent, per capita, in the Bay Area than elsewhere in the United States. This, he suggested, gives the Bay Area an advantage over any other place in the world.

These nonprofit, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are restricted in how much legislative advocacy they can do and are strictly prohibited from political activities. But their power and influence have reached unprecedented levels in recent years, affecting issues as diverse as redwood preservation on the north coast of California and the World Trade Organization talks in Seattle. The Worldwatch Institute estimates that up to 70% of the 2 million NGOs in the United States were created during the past 30 years.

Many who make their living in California’s agricultural sector have often been at odds with environmental advocates on issues such as water distribution, pesticide use and endangered species. The Sierra Club (now technically a 501(c)(4), which engages in political lobbying and does not receive tax-deductible donations) has been viewed as a problem to agriculture for nearly a century, even though John Muir’s early nemeses — such as Michael Maurice O’Shaughnessy, who built the Hetch Hetchy Dam for San Francisco, and Clifford Pinchot, who promoted sustained-yield forestry — were more urban than rural.

Recent additions to California’s NGO club, such as Environmental Defense (formerly EDF) and the Natural Resources Defense Council have not been around as long as the Sierra Club but certainly have made

In California’s future, nonprofit organizations will be squarely in the middle of the struggles to address the state’s natural-resource, conservation and infrastructure challenges.
species are halted and water quality is improved by the reduction of toxic wastes entering the streams. All of these objectives can be quantified, such as the number of acres of a habitat type, the size and age-structure of a fish population, the number of days of natural flooding of riparian areas, the number of additional acres exposed to tidal flushing, and reductions in the rate at which alien species enter the system.

Future in focus: The value of ecosystems

Obviously, achieving these goals and objectives will not be easy. The CALFED program’s ultimate success will depend on hundreds of actions, small and large, at hundreds of locations. The goals will be achieved only if there is widespread public support for the values of ecosystem restoration.

First, the public must be convinced that managing the Bay-Delta region on an ecosystem scale will have large economic payoffs in the future, justifying the multibillion-dollar, upfront investment that will likely be required. For example, expanding the flood plain along the Sacramento River (creation of a “meander belt”) not only would restore a variety of habitats for native plants and animals (including rearing areas for juvenile salmon), it could also improve the reliability of water supplies to Southern California by increasing the ability of flood-control reservoirs to store water. If the flood plain were larger, reservoirs such as Shasta would not have to be drawn down in winter as a flood-prevention measure and then not have enough rain to refill it. The nightmare of water managers is to drain a reservoir in winter as a flood-prevention measure and then not have enough rain to refill it. An enlarged flood plain can essentially increase the storage capacity of reservoirs without having to build new dams because the excess water has a place to go.

However, many of the actions taken by CALFED through its member agen-