

Local Commentary • Water

Landmark water package an investment in our future

It may end up being the most important investment Californians will make in their water system since the State Water Project was created nearly 50 years ago.

Last month the Legislature approved a package of bills and a proposed water bond initiative that represent major steps toward ensuring a reliable water supply for future generations of Californians, while restoring and protecting the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta and other ecologically sensitive areas.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger hailed the package as an important investment in California's future. State water leaders and those of us at Castaic Lake Water Agency agree.

Timothy Quinn, executive director of the Association of California Water Agencies, said after the Legislature approved the bills: "The package lays out a workable governance structure for the Delta, and a clear path for completing the important work of the Bay-Delta Conservation Plan, which offers an historic opportunity to improve both ecosystem health and water

supply reliability." Parts of the package already have been signed into law by Schwarzenegger, but one key element — the proposed \$11.14 billion water bond — will require voter approval.

The Safe, Clean, and Reliable Drinking Water Supply Act of 2010 is expected to be on November's statewide ballot. So what does all of this mean, and how will this package work together to help address California's pending water crisis? The package consists of the bond initiative plus four policy bills, each of which tackles a different aspect of the water crisis:

- Senate Bill 1: Delta governance/Delta plan;
- Senate Bill 6: Groundwater monitoring;
- Senate Bill 7: Statewide water conservation; and
- Senate Bill 8: Water diversion and use/funding.

The \$11.14 billion general obli-

gation bond proposal, if approved by voters, would fund seven categories of projects: Drought relief (\$455 million), water supply reliability (\$1.4 billion), Delta sustainability (\$2.25 billion), statewide water system improvement (\$3 billion), conservation and watershed protection (\$1.785 billion), ground-water protection and water quality (\$1 billion) and water recycling and conservation (\$1.25 billion).

Each piece of the puzzle serves an important function in the effort to address California's water crisis, ensuring the availability of a precious life-sustaining resource while also protecting ecosystems. This is not a quick fix — this is the beginning of a long-term investment that would unfold over the next 20 years.

The crisis has come to a head, but it did not happen suddenly, nor will it be fixed suddenly.

As we have discussed before, a variety of factors have conspired to create this crisis, including:

- An ongoing drought, which certainly is not the last California will endure.
- A series of court-ordered re-

ductions in pumping of water from the Delta, to protect the Delta smelt, salmon and other fish species.

When it comes to groundwater monitoring, we're glad to see its importance gaining statewide recognition via SB6.

Here in the Santa Clarita Valley, we have long monitored local groundwater supplies because they are such a vital part of our local water supply mix. SB6 requires for the first time that local agencies throughout the state monitor the water levels and quantities of water in their groundwater basins, which will help improve management of these valuable resources.

Regarding conservation, the goal of SB7 has become widely recognized by its easy-to-remember mission of reducing per-capita water use by 20 percent by the year 2020.

We're pleased to see the Legislature gave local agencies some latitude in determining the methodologies by which conservation will be measured, which will help minimize costs.

At CLWA we are actively engaged in various programs designed to promote ongoing water use efficiency, as opposed to short-term conservation, so we

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believe we and the local retailers are strongly positioned to meet the new efficiency goals.

In addition to requiring a reduction of per-capita water use, SB7 also, for the first time, requires development of agricultural water management plans to promote efficient water use by customers of agricultural water suppliers.

This makes sense, since California is one of the most productive agricultural regions in the world, using 34 million acre-feet of water each year to irrigate more than 250 different kinds of crops.

The fourth bill, SB8, revises and improves reporting requirements to account for water diverted from the Delta, and also allocates approximately \$550 million of existing bond funds to finance activities designed to benefit the Delta ecosystem and secure the reliability of the state's water supply.

Last but not least, the bond initiative, if approved by voters, will provide the financial resources needed to tackle water supply and ecosystem issues on a number of fronts.

Most prominent among the bond initiative's provisions would be the \$2.25 billion that would be invested in projects related to the Delta.

These investments would focus on "restoring the Delta as an important ecosystem," reducing the seismic risks associated with Delta water supply infrastructure, protecting water quality and reducing "conflict between water management and environmental protection," according to the state Department of Water Resources.

The bond measure would also provide much-needed funding to increase the state's water storage capacity, a vital need especially considering the potential for future droughts and long-term climate change that could potentially reduce snowpack and increase flood flows.

The 2010 bond would also provide \$1.25 billion for California's efforts to conserve water and increase the use of recycled water, all of which will help us get the maximum benefit from available supplies as well as increase our ability

to meet the conservation goals of SB7.

This package represents the sort of problem-solving that can occur when stakeholders are brought to the table to iron things out in good faith.

The legislative package is the product of an effort not to solve one problem or another, but a big-picture comprehensive approach to simultaneously meet co-equal goals that previously may have seemed at loggerheads.

Historic, landmark legislation? Absolutely.

Hopefully, Californians will agree next year this long-term investment is not only worthwhile, but also critical to the future sustainability of our state.

More information about local water and CLWA's efforts to promote efficient water use practices is available at www.clwa.org, and the Department of Water Resource's summary of the Legislature-approved package of water bills is available at www.water.ca.gov/news.

R. J. Kelly is the president of the Castaic Lake Water Agency Board of Directors. His column reflects the Agency's views and not necessarily those of The Signal.