

EDITORIAL: Put water bond on the ballot

By The Bee Editorial Board

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Gov. Jerry Brown's declaration of a drought emergency on Friday was a tepid first step to help farmers and their workers throughout California. The declaration frees the state's water managers to more quickly move what scant water there is to rights-holders. It also qualifies farming interests for federal programs that help with unemployment and financial losses.

But, as this third consecutive year of dry conditions has exposed, California's antiquated water system is in dire need of increased storage. Unfortunately for the 38.3 million residents of our state, Brown's overwhelming water focus has been on the Bay Delta Conservation Plan (BDCP) and its \$25 billion twin-tunnels water delivery project.

We agree with the governor that the delta's imperiled ecosystem must be restored and that the state's water conveyance system needs to be improved — both of which are BDCP goals. The reality is, lawsuits and strong opposition will block the project for many years, if, indeed, dirt is ever turned on the twin tunnels.

Increased water-storage capacity, however, is an immediate need, especially with climate-change scientists predicting that California will experience wildly fluctuating weather cycles. The state faces the possibility of seeing record rainfall in short bursts, followed by long dry spells — such as the one we are experiencing now.

We need more places to store rain and snowmelt in wet years. Among the possibilities: building a new dam at Temperance Flat on the San Joaquin River, raising the height of dams in Northern California and creating new underground water banks.

Given California's projected population growth (51 million residents in 2050), we will need all of these projects, as well as increased conservation measures.

It's clear, however, that Brown doesn't see California's future through this prism. In his 2014-15 budget, the governor rolled out his five-year, \$56.7 billion infrastructure plan. It didn't include the \$11.1 billion water bond the Legislature agreed upon in 2009 but has twice declined to place on the ballot.

Our recommendation is that the Legislature review the bond, remove pet projects used to woo lawmaker support in 2009 and put it before the voters in November. We also urge Brown to come out strongly in favor of the water bond — just as he worked hard to gain voter approval in 2012 for tax increases to get the state's financial house in order.

Many environmentalists oppose dams, saying they are harmful to wildlife and habitat. But well-planned and well-placed dam projects can solve or at least limit many environmental problems. By capturing more water, there is less need for more intrusive infrastructure projects.

Another criticism of dams is that they are expensive. Given what water will cost in the future and the economic losses California will suffer if it doesn't increase storage capacity, a dam at Temperance Flat, for example, would end up being a bargain.

This historic drought is causing millions of Californians to pay close attention to water and contemplate a future without it. They deserve to have the opportunity to vote on a water bond that includes more water storage this November.

We are confident that voters will agree with us that a balanced approach to water is good for all of California.

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