

# EDITORIAL: Drought focuses need to improve water bond

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The Fresno Bee Editorial Board



After three years of drought, California legislators have an opportunity to take a flawed \$11 billion water bond question and refocus it to improve the quality, effectiveness and cost of the proposed projects.

JAE C. HONG — AP

With rainfall and snowpack half of normal, lawns are going brown, farmers are getting a fraction of their allocations and food prices are rising.

Gov. Jerry Brown and legislators are negotiating a new water bond that would go before voters in November. If negotiations break down in the next few weeks — and we hope they don't — voters would decide on a flawed \$11 billion water bond crafted in 2009.

The 2009 version includes money for important improvements. But the bond is too big and includes too many pet projects of the lawmakers who supported it. Brown likely would oppose it, ensuring its demise.

Finding balance in a new bond will be difficult. No discussion involving water in California ever is easy. But the measure must include money to protect and restore the Delta, build above-ground storage, and increase conservation and water reuse.

It also must include money to clean polluted Southern California groundwater and provide safe water to Central Valley residents who now are warned against drinking what flows from their taps, and there must be protections against overdrafting of depleted aquifers.

California agriculture is vital to this state's economy and to the nation. Farmers must have water. Southern California residents need water, too. But there must be limits.

The bond almost certainly will need funds for raising the height of existing dams. And the bond ought to include money for local and regional agencies, which best understand their needs and solutions.

Sen. Lois Wolk, D-Davis, pushing Senate Bill 848, envisions a \$10.5 billion water bond which "would improve every region of the state." It includes money for groundwater cleanup, to help poor Central Valley towns, and grant Republican legislators' wishes for \$3 billion for dams and reservoirs.

Wolk, whose district includes part of the Delta, proposes to spend \$1.3 billion to shore up Delta levees and restore habitat. Mending the heart of the system that supplies water to 25 million people and 3 million acres of farmland is in the entire state's interest.

Brown envisions a bond of about \$6 billion, with about \$2 billion for reservoirs. Whether Brown picked the right amount or not, all sides should expect to take less, and, importantly, people and business owners who benefit from new projects should expect to pay their share for that water.

Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg, who is taking a leading role in the negotiations, says no money should be used to fund any aspect of constructing the twin tunnels, a highly controversial concept proposed by Brown to transfer water south from the Delta.

The bond must be "tunnel neutral," said Steinberg and others, including Assembly Speaker Toni Atkins. They're right. The tunnel concept is so divisive that its inclusion almost surely would doom a much-needed bond. The tunnel debate can take place later.

The drought is damaging the economy and the environment. But it's also serving to focus voters on California's strained and faulty plumbing system. Legislators must not squander this opportunity.

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