

Editorial: Spending on the Delta a sticking point in the water bond

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By the Editorial Board

If Gov. Jerry Brown and lawmakers want voters to weigh in this year on a multibillion-dollar water bond – a big if – they will need to compromise on what may seem like an arcane point: Who controls the money earmarked for the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta?

Brown proposed a \$6 billion bond after a \$10.5 billion proposal fell shy of the two-thirds votes needed in the Senate.

If the governor's vision of a smaller bond prevails, there would be less money available for projects that benefit legislators' districts, meaning legislators would have less incentive to support placing it on the ballot.

Republican lawmakers have said they want \$3 billion for new reservoirs. Any bond would require a two-thirds vote, so Republicans have relevancy in the discussion, something they've lacked in recent years.

The size of the bond might be relatively easy to settle, assuming legislators can limit their wish list. Perhaps more complicated would be how to spend whatever money is earmarked to aid the Delta ecosystem.

The reason has to do with Brown's proposal to build twin 35-mile-long, 40-foot-diameter tunnels, even though none of the bond money would directly be used to pay for the water diversions.

All sides in the discussion claim they want the bond to be "tunnel neutral." But what that means depends on who is using the term.

Sen. Lois Wolk, D-Davis, and other Delta interests envision placing the Delta Conservancy in charge of approving Delta projects and doling out bond money for habitat restoration and to promote the Delta economy.

The conservancy is governed by an 11-member board, including five supervisors from Delta counties, who are, at best, skeptical of the tunnel project.

However, some Republicans and water contractors fear projects approved by the Delta Conservancy would not work toward the goal of the Bay Delta Conservation Plan, which is to provide a reliable supply of water from the Sacramento River to the San Joaquin Valley and Southern California.

Supporters of the twin tunnels, including the powerful Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, Central Valley agricultural interests and Santa Clara County, are convinced that Delta Conservancy officials oppose the tunnels. They'd prefer that the state Department of Fish and Wildlife be in charge of any money earmarked for the Delta.

Delta interests fear that habitat restoration work by Fish and Wildlife would help lead to construction of the tunnels.

The debate over the size of the bond and which agency oversees restoration of the Delta might lend itself

to a resolution, assuming, of course, policymakers see benefit in making a deal that would lead to a statewide vote.

As the north-south water war goes on, year after year, the Delta continues its ecological decline, and people living in small towns in the Central Valley are relegated to drinking tainted water, or, if they can afford it, bottled water. Money from a bond might actually help pay to cleanse their groundwater.

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