

California lawmakers float \$7.195 billion water bond proposal

 fresnobee.com/2014/08/12/4065296/scrambling-on-water-bond-california.html

By Jeremy B. White

Scrambling to place a new water bond before voters, Californias legislative leaders on Monday converged on a \$7.195 billion proposal and carved out more time to finish it by delaying a looming electoral deadline.

Contours of the water bond blueprint surfaced as the Legislature toiled under a rapidly closing window to act. With November elections months away, Californias secretary of state was scheduled to begin printing voter guides on Monday evening.

Forged through months of negotiations, the new proposal is larger than the \$6 billion figure emphasized by Gov. Jerry Brown but contains less money for surface storage than the \$3 billion sum Republicans have trumpeted. It contains provisions likely to displease environmentalists.

Legislation passed Monday bought lawmakers more time, while lashing themselves to a schedule requiring a decision this week. They now have until Wednesday to agree on a new water bond if they want to ensure the proposal is detailed in a forthcoming voter guide. Printing an additional, supplemental voter guide could cost taxpayers millions.

The practical effect of this bill is to give the Legislature and the governor an additional two days to finalize a deal for the water bond and avoid potential voter confusion with an erroneous voter guide, Assembly Speaker Toni Atkins, D-San Diego, said on the Assembly floor.

Lawmakers also approved legislation that would renumber ballot measures, placing a revised water bond and a rainy-day reserve fund secured in budget talks earlier this year at the top of the November ballot.

The point of this bill is to ensure that two legislative measures, the rainy-day fund and hopefully the new water bond to be passed in the coming days, are at the top of the ballot, Atkins said.

After signing both bills, Gov. Jerry Brown issued a statement exhorting lawmakers to finish work on a new water bond.

Today's legislative action provides additional time to get an acceptable water bond one thats affordable and considers the needs of all Californians, Brown said. Lets work together to get this done.

The drought has made doing so a priority for many lawmakers. For months, though, they have been unable to strike a deal on a measure that could replace an \$11.1 billion bond proposal, passed in 2009 and currently on the November ballot, that many legislators say voters would reject.

After remaining publicly silent for months on his priorities, Brown waded into the debate recently by arguing for a \$6 billion measure. He has said he would campaign against the \$11.1 billion bond now on the ballot, and lawmakers must win his signature on a replacement.

Talks continued through last weekend, with disputed points including the total amount of money for storage and language governing funds for the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. The compromise that emerged on Monday would include \$2.5 billion for storage projects.

We are negotiating and working hard to try to replace the water bond from 2005 with a different water bond, with a smaller water bond, Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg, D-Sacramento, said on the Senate floor Monday. And we are negotiating hard with the administration and our Republican colleagues in a bicameral fashion to try to get this done.

Because a new bond requires a two-thirds vote, Republican support will be indispensable if a new water bond is to pass. Republicans have been steadfast on the need for a large storage outlay and have been pressing for at least \$3 billion.

A spokesman for Senate Minority Leader Bob Huff, R-Diamond Bar, stressed that Senate Republicans are not there on supporting the latest proposal. In July, the caucus rejected a \$10.5 billion proposal that included \$3 billion for storage.

The Governor finally provided details a couple hours ago on a water bond and we are reviewing them now, spokesman Peter DeMarco said in an email on Monday afternoon. Discussions continue among all stakeholders and we remain hopeful that a solution can be reached that works for all Californians.

In a statement, Assembly GOP Leader Connie Conway, R-Tulare, said the latest proposal is going in the right direction but that there is still much work to be done on the amount of money allocated to surface storage and other issues.

The proposal fails to provide a sufficient down payment on the two large storage projects that are the backbone of any comprehensive water plan, Conway said. Shortchanging water storage will result in one or both water storage projects not being built, and water that could provide for millions of households per year would continue to be lost.

Other Republicans faulted the governor and the Legislature for allowing bond talks to come down to a last-minute sprint.

Where have we been? Where has the administration been since January? Sen. Jim Nielsen, R-Gerber, said on the Senate floor. This water crisis has been around all these many months. Now in these last moments of session were going to panic, and gear up.

Disputes over storage money have not been the only obstacle to compromise. The fate of money for the Delta has also bedeviled lawmakers, drawing skepticism over Browns controversial Delta tunnel plan into the water bond debate.

Bond proposals circulating this year explicitly prohibited money for building the tunnels. But the Bay Delta Restoration Plan also calls for significant spending to shore up the Deltas ecosystem and offset the consequences of boring two enormous tunnels underneath the Delta.

Environmentalists and other skeptics have warned that, in allocating money for Delta habitat, a water bond could expedite the Delta tunnel project. The new bond includes a total of \$1.47 billion to nurture watersheds around the state, mostly to be distributed through various nature conservancies.

A combined \$137.5 million of it would go to the Delta. The Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta Conservancy would manage \$50 million of that outlay. The states Department of Fish and Wildlife would oversee the rest, with the caveat that it cannot be used to pay for construction or mitigation related to Delta conveyance facilities.

In its current form, the bond would also allocate \$500 million for clean drinking water, \$700 million for water recycling projects, \$780 million for regional water security and \$850 million to combat groundwater contamination.

Groundwater is pumped from beneath the earth, distinguishing it from surface sources such as reservoirs and rivers. Increasing reliance on well water during the drought has strained groundwater supplies. Some of the \$2.5 billion the bond tabs for storage could go to groundwater management.

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