

Historic drought is backdrop for water bond vote

FRESNO. – Gov. Jerry Brown and lawmakers are hoping California’s worsening drought persuades voters to approve borrowing billions of dollars for new water projects, treatment systems and conservation measures.

The \$7.5 billion water package to appear on the Nov. 4 ballot as Proposition 1 includes \$2.7 billion for new reservoirs along with billions more for recycling water, conservation and groundwater cleanup. It also calls for shoring up levees in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta to lessen the chances of a catastrophic flood.

The measure comes as California grapples with a third consecutive dry year and after Brown declared a drought emergency in January.

In August, both Democrats and Republicans voted nearly unanimously to put it on the ballot in a rare sign of solidarity on the often-thorny subject of water. Prop. 1 has won backing from agricultural and conservation groups.

Critics such as Zeke Grader, executive director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen’s Association, doubt whether Prop. 1 goes far enough to update California’s aging water storage and delivery system.

“I think we need a bond act,” Grader said. “But we need a good bond act, not something that was sloppily put together.”

If it’s approved by voters, the state will issue \$7.1 billion in new borrowing and redirect \$425 million from past ballot propositions.

Many provisions in the measure are designed to increase the availability of water, including \$2.7 billion – the largest portion of the bond – that likely would be spent on building two new reservoirs, the Sites Reservoir in Colusa County north of Sacramento and Temperance Flat northeast of Fresno.

An additional \$725 million would be spent on water recycling and treatment projects, with \$900 million for cleaning up contaminated groundwater.

The opposition campaign – Californians Against More Debt, Misplaced Spending – argues that the measure would thrust the state deeper into debt for decades while doing nothing to immediately address the ongoing drought. The billions spent will benefit corporate farms and would be better used on schools, roads and health care, the campaign backed by delta interests and some environmental groups argues.

Grader said he opposes the measure because he doesn’t believe the two proposed reservoirs will deliver enough water to make a significant difference, while taking water away from fish that rely on California rivers as habitat. Grader said the opposition will be outspent by supporters.

In support, The Nature Conservancy’s director of external affairs and policy, Jay Ziegler, said the drought illustrates the need for long-term investment throughout the state’s water system. Ziegler said he believes voters recognize the need for the bond.

Ziegler disputed claims that the bond money would automatically be spent on building new dams, saying the focus is likely to be on restoring the depleting underground water storage instead. The California Water Commission, a seven-member body appointed by the governor and approved by the state Senate, will decide how to spend \$2.7 billion for storage.

