

Jim Patterson and Joel Nelson: Water bond promises must be kept

By Jim Patterson and Joel Nelson

If you, like 3.5 million Californians, voted “yes” on the \$7.5 billion water bond last year, you should start paying attention to how Gov. Jerry Brown is planning to spend the bond money.

It may not be on building new dams to store water for future dry years like he assured voters, farmers and legislators before the election.

The governor recently divulged how he wants to spend the first \$532 million: restoring streams, rivers and watersheds, water recycling projects, upgrading drinking water treatment plants, rebates for people buying water-efficient appliances and, finally, groundwater management and cleanup.

Something seems to be missing from this list.

In 2014, last-minute negotiations among Republicans, Valley agriculture leaders and senior members of the governor’s staff produced more money for surface storage dams and the promise of bond money to build Sites Reservoir north of Sacramento and Temperance Flat near Fresno. These negotiations resulted in final approval of the water bond by the Legislature.

Then the governor campaigned for the water bond using key words like “dams” and “surface water storage.” Now, the actual language of the bond is so vague that it’s not farfetched to think some in the governor’s camp don’t think creating surface water storage is a mandate of the bond. We believe this raises serious questions about whether funds designated for water storage will ever be used to build the new dams we so desperately need.

These dams would help create certainty for California farmers who tend the breadbasket of the world. We lead the nation in producing more than two dozen crops, many of which, like artichokes and almonds, are nearly exclusively grown in California.

We grow over one-third of our nation’s vegetables, 65% of its fruits and nuts, and export to countless soil-poor nations around the world. If we don’t modernize our hydrology by collecting water from storms in wet years and storing it for the dry years, we risk destroying a critical portion of the most important industry in the world, as well as hurting families when the prices of fruits and vegetables soar.

With the governor making his priorities known in his proposed budget, the future of our state’s water system now lies in the hands of a committee of nine appointed bureaucrats. While no decisions have been made yet, over the next two years the California Water Commission (CWC) will decide how to spend \$2.7 billion intended for water storage projects based on whether or not projects provide a “public benefit,” which is government speak for projects that deal with water quality and supply, restore the ecosystem, or help with flood management.

These unelected commission members will decide which projects are winners and which are losers, and it will be up to the people to hold them accountable. As a concerned electorate, we must insist that these important decisions made by the CWC are done in the light of day and with plenty of opportunity for taxpayers to voice their opinions.

The passage of the water bond has put our state on a path to building new water storage but now that we know Gov. Brown isn’t making new water storage projects a priority, we must remain vigilant to make sure promises he made to voters, farmers and legislators are promises kept.

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