

Opinion: Old water conflicts open again

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Exactly six months ago, the Capitol's politicians were hailing a new era of bipartisan comity and cooperation with the overwhelming passage of \$7.5 billion in bonds to improve the state's water supply.

Voters, motivated by a severe drought, added their voices three months later with an overwhelming approval of the bond measure, Proposition 1.

Now, however, the money must be spent and some of the state's age-old conflicts over how water should be managed are re-emerging, along with the Capitol's perennial jousting over who will control the allocation of funds.

Unlike previous water bonds, Proposition 1 did not contain specific projects, but rather general categories of water spending. And Gov. Jerry Brown has submitted a plan to allocate \$533 million in bond funds in the 2015-16 budget, just 7 percent of the total.

However, Brown is also asking the Legislature, in effect, to give the administration control over the entire pot of money for as many as 12 years, encompassing the rest of his governorship and all of his successor's, subject to the bond's general categories.

That stance didn't sit well with members of the Senate Budget Committee during an initial hearing Thursday, reflecting not only the long-standing institutional friction between the two branches of state government, but the obvious differences among legislators on what projects should have priority.

Some of those differences are ideological – whether new reservoirs and other storage projects should be speeded up, for instance, or whether the emphasis should be placed on conservation programs or watershed restoration.

Some, meanwhile, are parochial, reflecting pressures from local water officials and politicians on legislators to get money for long-pending projects.

Senators of all ideological stripes, however, worried aloud that if they allocate all of the money now, they'll lose control over which specific projects receive bond money. The committee chairman, Sen. Mark Leno, D-San Francisco, was clearly irked that “now we're up against deadlines.”

The Legislative Analyst's Office, in a report on Proposition 1, says the Legislature should set parameters for spending the money and oversee how it is spent.

Administration officials defend the governor's approach as reflecting the long-range nature of water project planning and construction, and cite the perils of stop-and-go development if funds are subject to the annual budget process.

They also uttered reassuring words about “transparency” and “accountability” in choosing projects that survive the competitive selection process they are now devising.

“I'm very open,” state water director Mark Cowin told the committee, adding, “I have no desire to stretch this out over 10 years. We don't want to leave a dime on the table.”

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