

# California's \$1-billion emergency drought relief is tiny drop in bucket

No matter how much longer California's drought lingers, politicians don't have the power to make it rain. So on Thursday they tried the next best thing – they proposed showering the state's parched landscape with money.

Gov. Jerry Brown and top lawmakers from both parties unveiled a \$1-billion-plus plan to improve the state's water infrastructure, provide emergency assistance to struggling communities and protect wildlife.

"This is a struggle," Brown said during a Capitol news conference. "Something we're going to have to live with. For how long, we're not sure."

Even as lawmakers touted their latest proposal, they acknowledged its limitations.

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Assembly Republican leader Kristin Olsen (R-Modesto) called it a "Band-Aid" and Assembly Speaker Toni Atkins cautioned that it "will not solve our water emergency."

Only a small fraction of the proposal announced Thursday – \$27.4 million – involves new funding, which would largely be used to deliver food and water to struggling Californians in the Central Valley.

Most of the legislation involves spending bond funds already approved by voters or paying out money faster than previously scheduled, and some projects may not be completed for years.

For example, the proposal would tap the \$7.5-billion water bond approved by voters in November, spending \$272.7 million to safeguard drinking water and support recycling and desalination initiatives.

8

The biggest chunk of funding in the legislation does not directly address the drought at all. The proposal includes \$660 million for flood control projects, part of a bond measure that was passed a decade ago and is scheduled to expire next year.

Brown explained the inclusion of the money by warning of "extreme weather events" caused by climate change.

"And with extreme weather events, you get drought. And then all of a sudden, when you're all focused on drought, you can get massive storms that flood through these channels and overflow and cause havoc," he said.

Jay Ziegler, California policy director for the Nature Conservancy, said improving the state's levies could help replenish groundwater – which has been aggressively drained as farmers drill for water – when the rains finally return.

"History shows us that every time California comes out of one of these droughts, it's with a boom and bust cycle of rain," he said.

Brown was joined Thursday by Democratic and Republican legislative leaders in a show of broad support, and lawmakers are expected to act quickly on the proposal next week.

Senate leader Kevin de León (D-Los Angeles) said more legislation would follow, calling Thursday's announcement

“just a down payment on our efforts to address the drought.”

California’s drought is entering its fourth year, and this is the second consecutive year that lawmakers have considered emergency legislation to address the problem.

In 2014, Brown signed a \$687.4-million bill to fund infrastructure projects with previously approved bond money and send aid to communities facing acute water shortages.

8

So far, a third of the money has been spent, which includes direct relief to residents, said Richard Stapler, spokesman for the California Natural Resources Agency.

“There is a requirement that proper oversight be given to the awarding and expenditure of the funds, which takes time,” Stapler said. “Also, construction of the projects is time-consuming.”

The latest proposal comes amid growing concern about the state's dry conditions.

On Tuesday, the State Water Board tightened its watering restrictions, telling urban agencies to limit the number of days that residents can water their yards.

Officials also warned that they will impose tougher restrictions in coming months if local agencies don't ramp up conservation efforts.

"We are not seeing the level of stepping up and ringing the alarm bells that the situation warrants," said Felicia Marcus, chairwoman of the State Water Resources Control Board.

So far, the board has stopped short of mandatory limits on water use. On Thursday, Brown didn't rule out taking the step in the future.

“When you bring the hammer down, when you don't — it's a judgment call,” he said. “But I've been asking that same question myself.”

Senate Republican leader Bob Huff (R-Diamond Bar) echoed the need for Californians to use less water.

“Everyone in the state has to ask the question - how can I conserve more water?” he said.

The state's water situation is in some respects slightly better than it was a year ago. Precipitation in key watersheds in Northern California is 81% of normal for the date. Shasta Lake, California's largest reservoir, is 58% full, compared with 45% a year ago. Lake Oroville is half full, compared with 45% at this time last year.

Customers of the State Water Project, which delivers supplies from Northern California to Southland cities, will get 20% of their contract requests, compared with only 5% in 2014.

But water managers are troubled by the lack of snow in the mountains, which has all but disappeared at 12% of average levels, down from 28% last year.

The mountain snowpack acts as a natural reservoir that in a normal year can hold much as a third of the state's water supply, slowly releasing it throughout the spring as seasonal water demand rises. This year that release will be a trickle.

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