

EDITORIAL: \$1.1 billion in drought relief helps, but we need rain



Ski lift chairs sit idle at shuttered Soda Springs on Wednesday, March 18, in Soda Springs, Calif. Warm winter weather has left the Sierra snowpack at near record low levels and sped up the closure of several Tahoe area ski resorts - including Soda Springs - following a promising start to the season. The drought is also forcing resort operators to find new attractions to lure tourists.

THE SACRAMENTO BEE, RANDY PENCH — AP Photo

At legislators' prodding, Gov. Jerry Brown began unfurling his tight fist by agreeing to spend \$1.1 billion to combat the drought.

The question: What took him so long?.

In his initial budget proposal, Brown allocated a sparse \$23 million from the November bond to deal with the drought by improving water efficiency on farms and among urban users. That proposal was dated in December, when there was hope the state would not face a fourth year of drought.

Finally, with the arrival of spring and the Sierra snowpack little more than a snowpatch, California politicians took action

Sen. President Pro Tem Kevin de León had been agitating for spending on immediate conservation steps, a laudable goal, and reached agreement with Speaker Toni Atkins early last week. Assembly Republican Leader Kristin Olsen and Senate Republican Leader Bob Huff joined the Democrats at the news conference to announce the spending plan March 19.

In a happy sign that the effort to deal with the drought remains bipartisan, Huff introduced Brown as California's "great governor" before turning the microphone over to the Democrat. The governor proceeded to promise more emergency measures as needed.

The spending plan includes \$272 million from the \$7.2 billion water bond approved by voters in November. The projects seem attainable: money to conserve water by installing low-use plumbing, improving recycling, and helping those farmers who have not yet installed up-to-date irrigation.

Another \$44 million would be spent on emergency water and food aid, much of it intended for Central Valley towns where food bank use has spiked as the drought has led to lay-offs. Kudos to Community Food Bank President/CEO Andy Souza for impressing on lawmakers the desperate need for this allocation.

Another \$660 million would be spent from a bond approved by voters in 2006 for flood control, nine years ago.

In 2006, state authorities declared that the \$4.2 billion Proposition 1E bond would be used for “urgent projects to protect homes and lives across the state.” We cannot help but wonder how urgent the need was when officials are only now getting around to spending a significant chunk of the Proposition 1E money.

Whatever the urgency was in 2006, Brown and legislators seem anxious to spend the \$660 million now, though not because flooding is much of a threat during these dry days. By terms of the 2006 bond, the state would lose the money if it fails to appropriate it by July 2016. Much of the flood control money would be spent in the Sacramento region. The work, officials reason, could help in a future drought.

The remainder of the \$1.1 billion comes from a variety of sources, including \$30 million generated by the cap and trade program. Cap and trade fees are supposed to be used to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

In this instance, cap and trade money will be used for local water conservation and rebate programs, improved metering, and replacement of leaky water systems. All seem worthy measures, if tangential to the stated cap and trade goal of combating climate change.

No doubt, the \$1.1 billion will help conserve the water we have, though the package seems cobbled together in a manner intended to suggest to the public that government is taking action. The real solution, however, would be a series of storms. No amount of money can make it rain.

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