

Where to store water? Above ground or below ground?

By Joe Byrne Special to The Bee

JOIN THE CONVERSATION: There are major disagreements over how best to spend \$2.7 billion of the water bond on projects to store water either above ground in reservoirs or below ground in aquifers; what advice would you give as the California Water Commission evaluates a variety of projects? [Submit a letter](#) or [comment on our Facebook page](#).

Last year, with support from more than two-thirds of the voters, Californians passed Proposition 1, the state water bond. This far-reaching measure allocated \$2.7 billion for water storage projects to improve California's water system and its natural environment to better prepare us for future devastating droughts, like the one we are experiencing now.

The California Water Commission has been entrusted with this investment to help meet the state's water needs in the future and takes this charge from voters with utmost seriousness. We have already launched a public engagement process to help the commission as it develops the grant program, called the Water Storage Investment Program.

A few facts up front:

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- According to Proposition 1, the commission may only fund "public benefits" associated with water storage projects.
- These public benefits include improvements to the ecosystem, improved water quality, recreation opportunities, flood management and provisions for emergency response.
- A project must show measurable benefits to the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta or its tributaries and must improve the operation of the state's water system.
- The state's cost share for a project can't exceed 50 percent of the total project cost, and half of the state's cost share must go toward ecosystem improvement public benefits.
- Projects can include water stored above ground or below ground, projects that use both types of storage together, or operate existing projects in a way that provides more benefits.
- The legislation also dictates the timeline that the commission must follow in this process. Importantly, the commission may not award any funds to projects before Dec. 15, 2016.



Difficult questions have been raised during our commission meetings regarding the criteria we are working under and the program we are developing. How do we determine if a project is eligible? How do we quantify and measure the public benefits of a surface storage or groundwater storage project? How do we prioritize environmental benefits?

The commission has been and will continue to work hard to answer these questions and many others as it creates the specific requirements and criteria of the water bond. While the requirements of the water bond are the foundation for our program, we will look to a diverse stakeholder advisory committee and the public for input throughout the process.

The commission will be making critical investments that will improve the health of our water management system and yield far-reaching public benefits for all Californians. The commission intends to work with applicants to make sure that they understand the process and evaluation criteria. Project applicants will be required to clearly identify how their projects would provide the public benefits. They will also be required to demonstrate that they have sufficient locally generated funds for the nonpublic benefits portion of projects.

Throughout this process, the commission is committed to ensuring public engagement and input. Here's how:

1. We're gathering information about potential projects that meet the bond criteria.

Although many water storage projects are known to the state, public agencies have long compiled information to support water storage projects if funds became available. To learn about these projects, we issued an informal scoping survey in February to organizations across the state.

The survey was intended as an educational process on both sides. The commission wanted to learn about potential projects, and we wanted applicants to learn about the legislative guidelines. The survey was not intended to provide a complete list of projects. It was also not intended to determine project eligibility.

Survey results indicated a significant need for more education about the program, specifically about the legislative requirements for eligible projects.

We received information on 147 projects, yet only 64 respondents indicated their project produces ecosystem benefits, a required element for funding in the bond language. And only 34 respondents indicated their project produces benefits to the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, which is also required.

Most of the submitted projects cited are not ready for construction today. Only 18 respondents have completed environmental reviews. Most respondents said they are two to four years away from being ready to receive funding. While some have criticized the bond by restricting the commission to award money before Dec. 15, 2016, based on the survey, it appears that the funding timeline will not delay any projects.

2. We have established a robust stakeholder engagement program.

The commission has convened the stakeholder advisory committee with representatives from 29 organizations representing a wide array of interests. The committee will meet for the first time on April 1, and then every month through October, if necessary. All of its meetings will be open to the public. This committee will spend considerable time discussing criteria and guidelines of the program, and will inform the commission as it makes its decisions.

3. We have established a statewide public information process.

The Water Storage Investment Program can be confusing and difficult to understand. Many technical requirements and layers of legislative rules must be followed. To help applicants and other interested parties understand the process, the commission will host a series of public meetings across the state in the next six months. The first public meeting will be held in Chico on April 13. Five more will follow in Northern, Central and Southern California.

4. The California Water Commission is going on the road.

The commission will be conducting its meetings in various locations, including San Jose, Fresno and Los Angeles in the coming months. These public meetings will provide opportunities for the public to learn and provide input

throughout our process. See the commission's website at cwc.ca.gov for more information about our meetings.

While the \$2.7 billion will not solve California's water problems, it is a substantial investment and important step that is consistent with the governor's Water Action Plan, which aims to move California toward long-term sustainability by creating a more reliable water supply, restoring ecosystems and helping the state's water system become more resilient. The California Water Commission is committed to conducting an open and transparent process, and we hope that the public, including potential applicants, will be involved in this very important endeavor.

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