

State funding for larger reservoir above Millerton? Crowded field competes for it

By
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From the edge of Big Table Mountain, this is the view into the gorge containing the upper reaches of Millerton Lake near Temperance Flat. Temperance Flat Dam is proposed beyond the first ridge in the center of the photo.

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Will there be competition for the state bond money that could help pay for \$2.6 billion Temperance Flat Dam near Fresno?

Yes.

That's probably the only simple answer you may see over the next 18 months as the process unfolds to fund water-storage projects.

But that's not slowing down folks in San Joaquin Valley agriculture who consider this the best chance in decades to expand water storage above Millerton Lake by more than 1 million acre-feet. The state money could pay for nearly half of it.

So how much competition? State leaders asked for agencies around the state to fill out a survey "looking for information about the potential universe of projects."

They got 170 surveys, including one from Friant Water Authority about Temperance Flat. There is still time for that “potential universe” to expand before the state gets around to formal proposals.

Who’s handling the process? The purse strings for this part of the state bond money belong to the nine-member California Water Commission. Three members are from the Valley. At stake is \$2.7 billion.

The commission passed through Fresno to hear what residents think -- one of several stops around the state. It’s all in the name of communication and transparency, so let’s try to help this along a little.

Of the 170 surveys, only 22 addressed all the criteria necessary. The Friant Water Authority survey response on Temperance Flat is among the 22 that touch the right issues.

Those issues center on ecosystem benefits, a better state water system, water quality, cost effectiveness and a “measurable improvement” improvement to the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta or its tributaries.

That’s a busy list with lots of room for interpretation. Most folks who sent in the surveys haven’t caught up with it yet, but there is time for that to happen, too. The commission won’t be awarding money until December 2016 at the earliest.

The \$2.7 billion is not a lot of money in the water world. It could go fast, according to commissioner Joe Del Bosque, a west San Joaquin Valley farmer.

“We’re telling everyone to build their best case,” he said at an editorial board meeting at The Fresno Bee.

Kings River Conservation District general manager Dave Orth, who is another commissioner from the Valley, said it might also add value to combine projects to make investments go farther.

He talked about using a reservoir to capture water and slowly sending it to a groundwater bank where it could soak into the ground.

In case you’re wondering, the third Valley member on the commission is Maria Herrera of Self-Help Enterprises, the nonprofit community building organization in Visalia.

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