

Senate Democrats prod Gov. Jerry Brown for more drought spending

By Chris Megerian

Democrats in the state Senate want Gov. Jerry Brown to take swifter action to battle California’s drought, such as spending relief funds faster and prodding farmers to use water more efficiently.

The recommendations, sent to the governor [in a letter](#) this week, come as lawmakers prepare to work with Brown on a new budget proposal and the state braces for a dry summer.

[Lawmakers let anti-drought legislation die](#)

Caption Lawmakers let anti-drought legislation die

Lawmakers let anti-drought legislation die

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Landlords want to stop picking up tenants' water bills

William Shatner's solution? A pipeline from Seattle to California

The letter praised the governor’s leadership. But Sonoma State University political science professor David McCuan said it also showed some frustration with what he called Brown’s “trust me, I know what’s best” demeanor toward lawmakers.

With the drought increasing pressure on Sacramento to take action, McCuan said, “there are harder decisions that have to be made.”

In particular, Senate Democrats are concerned that the Brown administration isn't doing enough with the money that's available for drought-related efforts, including the water bond approved by voters last year.

“These funds should be spent much more quickly,” the letter says. “They could be appropriated and out on the street within the next few months — as opposed to years — to provide immediate drought relief.”

Since early last year, the Legislature has approved \$1.7 billion in emergency spending tied to the drought. Although that includes money to send drinking water to parched communities and to carry out other relief efforts, most of the funds are for long-term water projects that won't be finished for years.

The letter, signed by all 25 Democrats in the Senate, including President Pro Tem Kevin de León of Los Angeles, also expresses concern about water use by farmers, a political fault line in conversations about the drought.

“Agriculture uses much of the water in the state,” the letter says. “It can — and should — do more during the drought.”

Democrats said they weren't looking for "regulatory or punitive" measures, and proposed incentives for farmers to plant crops that need less water or to forgo flood irrigation in favor of more efficient methods.

Brown has defended agriculture and expressed doubts about "Big Brother" efforts to determine what farmers grow. Farmers have been alarmed by proposals to reduce their water use, arguing that they've already been making do with less during the drought.

California Farm Bureau President Paul Wenger said flood irrigation, in which water flows openly along the ground to reach crops, can be a useful technique for replenishing groundwater, which has been severely depleted.

He also questioned the effectiveness of providing incentives to plant different crops.

"I grow what you and other consumers want to buy," Wenger said. "Today people want almonds and walnuts."

It's unclear how the Senate Democrats' letter might affect the coming negotiations over the governor's spending plan.

Democrats in the Assembly had no role in the letter, although John Casey, spokesman for Speaker Toni Atkins (D-San Diego), said in a statement that they're generally supportive.

"But the devil is in the detail," he said.

Jim Evans, a spokesman for Brown, declined to address the senators' proposals, saying only that the administration appreciated the input.

"The drought poses a serious challenge to California and there's much work to do — so the administration values ideas and proposals from the Legislature, as well as from water districts, farmers, local officials, businesses and environmentalists," Evans said in a statement.

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UPDATED

10:45 a.m.: This story has been updated with a comment from a spokesman for Gov. Jerry Brown.