

Prepare for a deluge as Delta begins boiling over

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JOIN THE CONVERSATION: Why should the plan to build twin tunnels to transfer water from the Sacramento River to south of the Delta be put to a popular vote? [Submit a letter](#) or [comment on our Facebook page](#).

Jerry Brown was sounding a little like an eccentric uncle-governor the other day as he muttered about Spaceship Earth, how he got the Moonbeam moniker, and, yes, the need to recycle human waste into water.

Wearing a sweater and no tie, the governor was at ease among the 1,000 or so Association of California Water Agencies conventioners at the Sheraton last week as he gave one of his most direct pitches yet for his Delta plan. That's the one that includes two 40-foot-wide, 35-mile-long tunnels, which will cost \$17 billion, give or take.

Citing the research and engineering that has gone into the plan, the governor, his [unscripted tongue in his cheek, sort of](#), said: "Until you put a million hours into it, shut up." The comment elicited laughs and huzzahs from the audience, though his critics used the opportunity to issue huffy statements expressing their dismay.

Coming in a week when his appointees on the State Water Resources Control Board ordered deep cuts in residential water usage, Brown made clear that in his fourth and final term, he intends to get stuff done, specifically, the tunnel project. He believes it's the only reliable way of moving water around the Delta to the farms and cities to the south.

"You have to build some things. We have got to get water to people," Brown said.

It was no coincidence that a well-financed political group called [Californians for Water Security](#) unveiled a slick ad and lobbying campaign last week. Californians for Water Security includes organized labor, the building trades, business groups including the California Chamber of Commerce, and the state's largest farming interests.

"We must act urgently to protect the water supply for California's homes, farms and businesses, while restoring the environment of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta," the group said [in a letter signed by representatives](#) of nearly 50 unions, business groups and water agencies.

Its spokespeople won't say how much is being spent in the first ad buy. "We're certainly not done yet," Democratic consultant Robin Swanson said. Assume the well is deep. They'll need it.

Wealthy Stockton-area farmer Dean Cortopassi, who like Brown is a septuagenarian, and his wife, Joan, have spent \$2 million to [qualify an initiative for the 2016 ballot](#) that would require a statewide vote on any state projects costing \$2 billion or more that rely on revenue bonds. Read: Delta tunnels and high-speed rail.

"This measure puts the brakes on our state's public debt crisis by giving the voters a say in all major state bond debt proposals that must be repaid through specific revenue streams or charges imposed directly on Californians like taxes, fees, rates, tolls or rents," says the initiative, which was written by attorneys at the political law firm Nielsen Merksamer.

To run the campaign, Cortopassi has retained Democratic consultant Andrew Acosta and Meridian Pacific, a Republican consulting firm whose founder, Matt Rexroad, is a Yolo County supervisor.

"It doesn't stop the tunnels," said Meridian Pacific partner Tom Ross. "It would require a vote on projects of \$2 billion or more. It requires a public discussion on the tunnels. We would have a discussion on high-speed rail."

Although Cortopassi will have allies, the vast majority of the power and money will be on the other side. The anti-tunnel group, Restore the Delta, released emails showing that Paramount Farms, one of the largest land holders and growers in the state, is a driving force behind Californians for Water Security.

As he often does, Brown in his speech to the water association looked to history. Gov. Goodwin Knight was working on a trans-Delta conveyance back in the 1950s. Brown's father did the same in 1960s. Brown tried too when he was governor 40 years ago.

"If these problems aren't handled, they get worse and don't go away," Brown said last week.

Brown has surrounded himself with lifelong environmentalists. Like Brown, the governor's aides would never think to drive the Delta to ruin or cause the extinction of species so cattle ranchers, almond growers and land speculators could make more money.

But there's also an incongruity between Brown's advocacy of the tunnels and his governing philosophy. He talks about subsidiarity, the notion that issues and problems ought to be handled locally if at all possible. If he were to apply that to water, local water districts would focus more on recycling, conservation and underground storage.

He advocates alternatives to a centralized system of energy delivery and wants to wean commuters off gasoline-powered cars. The state uses huge amounts of energy to move water over the Tehachapi Mountains.

He's certain that climate change is disrupting weather patterns. Why, then, depend on massive new tunnels to move what could be an uncertain supply of water?

He talks about frugality and the need to pay off California's accumulated debt, but remains intent on building the \$17 billion tunnels to move water around the Delta.

Perhaps the tunnels are the best solution for the Delta and California's 39 million residents. I haven't spent a million hours studying the situation. But in the coming months, as our lawns turn brown, our showers get shorter and our water bills rise, we all will become steeped in the Delta, and likely be called upon to vote on its future.

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