

Fresno County aims to push Temperance Flat agency

By Marc Benjamin
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Fresno County supervisors want to lead an effort to get bond money to build Temperance Flat Dam on the San Joaquin River when funding becomes available in early 2017.

The dam is seen as critical to improving water supplies and reliability in the central San Joaquin Valley.

The county is being pressed into action after the splintering of the Friant Water Authority, said Supervisor Brian Pacheco. He said the authority was the most likely group to serve as the lead agency in the process before fracturing earlier this year because of disagreements among about half of its 21 member agencies.

Those agencies had differing ideas about the most serious problems the authority was facing in acquiring water.

Now, supervisors want to create a joint powers authority to serve as the lead agency. Kings County supervisors also are expected to discuss the issue Tuesday while supervisors in Madera and Tulare counties will address it over the next few weeks.

Pacheco and Supervisors Henry R. Perea and Buddy Mendes have held meetings with several irrigation districts, water leaders and city officials in recent weeks after it became increasingly apparent the Friant Water Authority was not going to spearhead the effort.

The county should be a participant, but maybe not the lead agency. The roles aren't defined yet.

Fresno County Supervisor Brian Pacheco

In addition to the four counties, other agencies pledging support to the effort include: Fresno and Madera irrigation districts; Chowchilla Water District; Table Mountain Rancheria; and the cities of Mendota and Orange Cove.

Perea said there has been little effort to start a program to get the \$2.7 billion of bond money available for water storage, and time is slipping away.

The \$2.6 billion Temperance Flat project would add more than 1 million acre-feet of storage above Millerton Lake. Sites Reservoir, near Maxwell in Northern California, also is in the running for water storage funding. Its projected price tag is \$3.9 billion.

"It will be a very competitive process for this water bond money," Perea said. "We should be working now because every day of delay is a day lost."

The plan is for Fresno County to become the starting point to organize the joint powers authority. Once the authority is organized, it will take the leadership role to get portions of the available funding.

"The county should be a participant, but maybe not the lead agency," Pacheco said. "The roles aren't defined yet."

\$2.6 billion

Estimated price tag for Temperance Flat Dam

State water officials will expect joint powers authorities to participate in the funding application process, said Mario Santoyo, executive director of the Latino Water Coalition.

A group from Northern California trying to build the Sites Reservoir has been organized for years, he said.

But Fresno County Supervisors Debbie Poochigian and Andreas Borgeas are not yet sold on the idea of the county's lead in a joint powers authority.

Borgeas said the county should not rush into forming the authority no matter how well intended the concept.

Poochigian said there is "broad agreement that we need to increase water supply," but she wants to ensure that the authority is properly structured and that costs and legal exposure for the county are minimized.

"I don't think anybody believes it's a bad idea, but there has been inadequate evaluation and vetting of the idea," she said.

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