

California leaders propose \$687 million to alleviate drought

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Gov. Jerry Brown and legislative leaders on Wednesday unveiled a proposal to spend roughly \$687 million to alleviate the impacts of California's drought, including efforts to clean and recycle water, improve conservation, capture rain, and give emergency food and housing assistance to farmworkers who will be out of work because their fields are fallow.

"The best way to make our communities more resilient to drought is to invest in projects that get the most out of every drop of water," said Senate leader Darrell Steinberg, who joined the governor and Assembly Speaker John A. Pérez in announcing the plan at the state's Office of [Emergency Services](#) at [Mather Field](#).

Money for the proposal would largely come from water and flood-prevention bonds voters approved in 2006, which means lawmakers don't have to wait for the annual [budget process](#) to approve spending the money. Steinberg and Pérez said they thought the legislation could go through in the next couple of weeks.

"We can get that money out the door and put it to use now," Steinberg said.

The state's top three Democrats spoke in front of a [command center](#) where state workers in brightly colored vests monitor all kinds of disasters – earthquakes, floods, fires, and even the current drought, which Pérez called a crisis that "goes beyond anything we have faced in our lifetime."

Brown touted the legislation's easing of water transfer rules – allowing people who don't need water as much to sell to those who do – and said the proposal focuses on making better use of the water California already has.

"You can't manufacture water," Brown said. "You can desalinate it. You can capture it. You can store it. You can move it. But within those constraints, that's exactly what we're doing."

Demonstrating action in the face of crisis is a must for politicians, said Jack Pitney, a professor of politics at [Claremont McKenna College](#). Brown is likely to run for a fourth term as governor this year, Pérez is running for controller and Steinberg, who is termed out of the Legislature at the end of the year, has said he hopes to seek another public office in the future.

“They have to do something,” Pitney said of the response to the drought. “In any crisis or natural disaster, the image every politician wants to avoid is [George W. Bush](#) looking down on [Hurricane Katrina](#) from Air Force One. They want to give the impression of action even if the reality is somewhat different.”

Brown worked to fend off criticism of the plan, saying the drought “is not caused by partisan gridlock or ideology. It’s caused by Mother Nature herself.”

Steinberg played offense, too, emphasizing that the plan neither relaxes environmental rules nor raises taxes.

But it didn’t take long for criticism to flow in from both the left and the right, with Republicans saying Democrats brought on the problem by not approving more reservoirs in the past, and some environmentalists saying the state could save more water by banning hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, a controversial method of extracting oil through injecting water deep underground.

“The governor has yet to show leadership and willingness to change and eliminate some of the more wasteful practices that use a lot of water and pollute a lot of water,” said Adam Scow, California Director of Food & Water Watch, a group opposed to fracking.

Other environmentalists praised the plan. “This legislation represents a significant state commitment to help communities diversify their [water supplies](#) and become more drought resilient, provide emergency drinking water, and offers much-needed assistance for drought-stricken communities,” Steve Fleischli, the water program director and senior attorney at the [Natural Resources Defense Council](#), said in a statement.

[Bob Huff](#), the Republican leader of the state Senate, said using [bond funds](#) makes sense, but he criticized the lack of action in the past.

“Hopefully this drought is a lesson to us that we need more water storage and a better [water system](#) to effectively manage the water we have,” Huff said in a statement.

Two Republicans in the Assembly – Minority Leader Connie Conway and Assemblyman Frank Bigelow – issued a statement calling the Democrats’ plan a “drop in the bucket” and said they plan to introduce a proposal today to “secure California’s water future and hopefully minimize the impact of future droughts on our state.”

Brown said fracking does not use much water and that building dams and reservoirs takes more time than the state has to alleviate the current drought. He called on Californians to get used to a new normal with less water.

“It is things like this drought that we will be facing in intensifying ways over the next years and decades,” Brown said. “So it’s time we learn how to deal with it, we mobilize our money, our people, our technologies, and most of all our capacity to cooperate.”

The plan – to be formalized in two bills in the coming days – includes:

- \$549 million from Propositions 84 and 1E for local governments that are ready to build drought-alleviation projects, including those to capture stormwater, distribute recycled water and enhance groundwater storage.
- \$46 million from state and federal funds to provide emergency food and shelter to people who are out of work because the farms they normally work on are fallow due to drought.
- \$40 million from cap-and-trade funds for water efficiency projects that save energy.
- \$15 million from the general fund for emergency drinking water.

The plan also includes a \$1 million publicity campaign encouraging Californians to save water. One famous face will soon hit the airwaves urging water conservation: pop star Lady Gaga, who recorded a drought-themed public service announcement for no pay as part of a deal allowing her to film at Hearst Castle.

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