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Governor gets scolded on water

swiegand@sacbee.com

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Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger took his balance-the budget stump speech to Fresno today - and got an earful of water.

After giving a speech on the fiscal travails California is facing because of a gaping budget deficit, Schwarzenegger took questions from an audience that was heavy with carpenters' union members, local elected leaders and people who were far more concerned with the San Joaquin Valley's water troubles than they were about Sacramento's political squabbles.

After a Fresno city councilwoman delivered lengthy comments about the problems the city faces because legislators and the governor are planning to divert gas tax money from local government to state government, Schwarzenegger called on a man who identified himself as "a cradle Californian and a Vietnam veteran."

"If you allow water to flow, you allow dams and canals to be built," the man said to enthusiastic applause, "you will raise revenue and you won't need to make cuts."

But, the man continued, since the governor had "refused to address the most important issue ... you have lost control of your state government."

"I hope you didn't refer to me as saying that I haven't addressed the issue," Schwarzenegger replied, "because I think it's very important that everyone know that I've been fighting for water for the last four years ... but I know that maybe you didn't mean that."

"I did mean it," the man shot back.

"OK, so you did mean it," Schwarzenegger replied. The governor then called Victor Lopez, the mayor of the nearby town of Orange Cove, up on stage to bolster Schwarzenegger's water credentials.

"If there's been anybody that has stood with us, the farm workers, the farmers and the business people of the whole state of California (on building a better water delivery system) it's been this governor from Day One," Lopez shouted. "There is going to be victory, because we have the best governor that any state in this whole nation has ever had!"

After another questioner importuned Schwarzenegger "please don't make us look like Bakersfield," the governor acknowledged that the water victory would have to wait until there is victory on balancing the budget.

"We will get a water deal as soon as the budget is done," he said. "But there will never be a water deal until you get a budget, because you have to pay for it ... It will be on the top of our list ... it has been on the top of the list for the last three years."

A carpenter told the governor that a way to put his union members and others to work was "to build more dams." And a city councilman from Porterville suggested that Schwarzenegger lead a counter-lawsuit against environmental groups and others who have filed suits in federal courts that have delayed some water storage and conveyance projects.

"I have been urging the federal courts to turn on the pumps, turn on the pumps," Schwarzenegger said, "because I think it's ridiculous that we pay more attention and feel sorry for the smelt and the fish and the (other) species than for the people of California."

The governor then excused himself so he could attend a meeting with local mayors. "About water," he deadpanned.

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