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From the Los Angeles Times

Democratic lawmakers introduce bills to deal with California water policy

The package would create a politically appointed council that could approve projects, such as a canal, involving the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. Local farm interests are critical.

By Bettina Boxall

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Democratic lawmakers unveiled a package of water bills Tuesday that would create a politically appointed council with power to push through projects dealing with the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, the troubled hub of California's waterworks.

The legislation, which deals with issues including conservation, ecosystem restoration and water rights, aims to break the stalemate over state water policy.

But the proposals are already under fire from some interests that fear the bills are a blueprint for jamming through big construction projects, such as a canal that would carry water around the delta.

The legislation, which is to be fleshed out in a conference committee when lawmakers return to Sacramento later this month, does not specifically authorize any projects. Rather, it creates the Delta Stewardship Council, which would have the authority to pursue delta restoration work and a "water conveyance facility."

Four of the council's seven members would be appointed by the governor and two by the Legislature. The seventh would be the chair of the Delta Protection Commission.

The bills call for water conservation and delta protections. They would also set in motion a potentially explosive examination of water rights in the delta watershed.

"Neither the delta ecosystem nor the state's water needs have been well served by decades of benign neglect," said Silicon Valley Sen. Joe Simitian, author of one of five bills in the package and chair of the Senate Environmental Quality Committee. "The system of governance is broken and the system of conveyance is broken."

Backers hope that a confluence of factors has created a window for action on the state's water problems, pushed into headlines this year by drought and environmental restrictions on delta pumping.

They aim to get the package to the Assembly and Senate for floor votes before the Legislature's adjournment in mid-September.

Only majority approval is required for the bills, meaning Democrats would need little Republican support. But that does not necessarily mean smooth sailing.

Delta farm interests and some environmentalists are wary of anything that could clear the way for a delta canal, a version of which was killed by California voters in the early 1980s.

"It's a fairly global, comprehensive package," said Jeffrey Kightlinger, general manager of the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, which imports water from the delta. "Whenever you do that, you're taking on a lot of sacred cows."

Kightlinger said he was glad the bills dealt with "most of the major issues that need to be addressed. The large 'but' is we have concerns with quite a few of the mechanics of how they want to do it."

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, who has called for construction of new reservoirs and indicated support for a delta canal, said in a statement that "fixing California's broken water system cannot be put off any longer; we must get it done this session.

"I look forward to reviewing their proposal and working in a quick and bipartisan way toward a comprehensive water plan that focuses on water supply reliability, conservation, environmental protection and increased storage."

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