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Calif. lawmakers shift focus to water problems

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SACRAMENTO, Calif.—With California mired in a third year of drought and thousands of farm acres lying fallow, lawmakers are turning their attention from the state's budget crisis to another issue that is equally as charged: state water policy.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and lawmakers of both parties want sweeping reforms that would overhaul how the state manages its water supplies. The difficulty, as with solving California's continual fiscal crises, will be finding compromise.

While the nation's most populous state has been growing, a half century-old delivery system that stores snowmelt in dozens of reservoirs and funnels the water to farms and cities throughout the state is showing signs of stress.

The growing demands on California's water supply also are wreaking havoc with the environment.

Water quality and conditions for fish have worsened in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, prompting federal restrictions on how much water can be pumped out of a region that serves as the hub of California's water-delivery network.

Even as problems grow more apparent with each year, state lawmakers have failed repeatedly to find common ground. Farmers, urban water districts, environmentalists, fishermen and others offer competing visions of what needs to be done.

"It's like trying to solve peace in the Middle East," said Laura Harnish, a San Francisco-based water expert at the Environmental Defense Fund. "People are very wedded to their water rights."

Lawmakers will return from their summer recess on Monday with their party leaders and the governor saying they want a comprehensive solution that will ensure adequate water supplies while protecting the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

The debate comes as farmers throughout the Central Valley are struggling to grow crops with less water after three years of below-average rain and snowfall in the Sierra Nevada. Federal pumping restrictions intended to protect vulnerable delta fish also have curtailed water deliveries. Thousands of acres have been taken out of production, orchard trees cut to stumps and farm workers laid off.

At the same time, cities throughout the state have imposed mandatory water rationing and limited the number of days homeowners can use outdoor sprinklers or wash their cars. Others have raised rates and imposed drought surcharges.

Farmers on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley, supported by Schwarzenegger and Republican lawmakers, have argued for more dams to supply the needs of a growing state. California's population is expected to grow from 38 million to 49 million by 2030.

Southern California water districts want to find a new way to funnel drinking water around the estuary, in part because of the court-imposed pumping restrictions and worsening water quality that becomes more expensive to treat.

The existing pumping system changes river flows in the delta and sucks fish in, killing them in large numbers. Water managers also are concerned about a breach in the 1,115 miles of earthen levees

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throughout the delta, which could disrupt water deliveries for months.

"Everybody understands if we don't act we will have disaster in the delta," said Department of Water Resources director Lester Snow.

Last year, a Schwarzenegger-appointed panel recommended changing how the state moves water through the delta. A separate state-federal task force also has suggested finding a new way to send water south to protect wildlife and ensure reliable water deliveries.

Reengineering the water-delivery system is a top priority of the Schwarzenegger administration and the nation's largest provider of treated drinking water, the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California. About a third of the water distributed to 18 million Californians by the district passes through the delta.

"If you're going to truly achieve water supply reliability and restoration of the delta, you've got to change where you divert water from the delta," said Roger Patterson, the district's assistant general manager.

The federal government curtailed delta pumping after a federal judge blamed state and federal water operations for some of the declines of the threatened delta smelt and endangered salmon.

Meanwhile, sport-fishing groups and environmentalists, bolstered by the federal court decisions, are demanding that habitat for the more than 750 species of wildlife be improved in the delta and its tributaries. Some also worry that building a canal to reroute fresh water will degrade delta water quality and lead to further declines of its fish and other species.

Assembly Speaker Karen Bass and Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg, both Democrats, have said they hope to reach a water deal with the governor by Sept. 11, the end of the legislative session.

Steinberg, of Sacramento, said lawmakers are under pressure this year to overcome the complications that have stalled past negotiations. Schwarzenegger also would like to claim a victory on water before he leaves office in January 2011.

"I think there is an even greater recognition that we must take action to solve California's water challenges," Steinberg said. "This is an opportunity to achieve something positive for California and to build."

A joint Assembly-Senate working group, which included lawmakers from both parties, has written a package of bills intended to restart water discussions.

Many of the reforms could be adopted directly by the Legislature and signed by the governor. Any proposal that requires money would have to win voter approval, leading the governor and lawmakers to consider a 2010 ballot measure.

Democrats have proposed rethinking how the state manages the delta, a fragile maze of levees, islands, river channels and sloughs that channel water from the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers to massive pumping plants. Those plants send drinking water to farms and roughly 25 million Californians in the south and San Francisco Bay area.

The 1,153-square-mile delta covers a land mass about the size of Rhode Island.

Democratic lawmakers want to create an independent, seven-member council to oversee

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habitat restoration and decide whether a new system to move water through or around the delta is needed.

In its current form, the Democrats' package is missing key elements long advocated by Republicans.

It omits authorization for new dams, as well as a bond proposal to pay for the long list of projects lawmakers envision. That's a deal-breaker for Sen. Dave Cogdill, a Republican from Modesto who has seen farmers in his Central Valley district fallow their fields this year because they are not receiving enough water.

"At the end of the day, it continues to be our position we need a comprehensive solution and we need it quickly," Cogdill said. "We've had more than enough time to analyze the situation."

Delta farmers and fishermen are lining up against the package and have organized demonstrations leading up to the hearings, including a "Million Boat Float" on Sunday from the delta town of Antioch up the Sacramento River to the state capital.

At issue for many delta communities is the growing support behind a proposal to build a canal that would divert water out of the Sacramento River and move it around the delta, where fresh water from the state's northern rivers mixes with tide water from San Francisco Bay.

Delta-area farmers and fishermen fear the loss of too much fresh water would lead to a saltier delta, harming fish and crops.

It's an idea that was rejected by voters in 1982, in part over fears that it was a veiled water grab for Southern California.

"The delta is not just a plumbing system. It's not just an aquarium," said Barbara Barrigan-Parrilla, campaign director at Restore the Delta, a nonprofit community group that opposes a canal. "We have living, breathing communities here."

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