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Water trauma

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California does not need another year of stalemate on water policy. The Legislature should not let old ideological battles again block progress on the primary water challenge facing the state: ensuring a reliable supply for the future.

That task entails addressing the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta first, to secure continued water exports from Northern California. All other water issues are secondary. And the best option for protecting water supplies is to channel exports around the delta instead of through the estuary.

But the Legislature also needs to avoid another political impasse over new dams and reservoirs -- an issue which has stymied progress on water policy for years. The governor this week demanded that money for new dams be part of the water legislation, an approach Democrats oppose. But the governor should set that issue aside for now; California does not have the time for more knee-jerk quarrels over policy while its water system deteriorates.

Democratic legislators introduced a package of bills last month aimed at addressing the state's water needs. The legislation, which had its first hearing this week, would create a new delta oversight council, mandate increased conservation, expand monitoring of water usage and build new protections for the delta.

Just how a large share of that legislation would work remains unclear, but the issue is vital for California. Water from the state's northern regions serves two-thirds of the state's population and irrigates millions of acres of agriculture. But that water now flows through the delta, which is facing environmental collapse. A 2007 federal court ruling slashed water exports from the delta to protect an endangered fish, leaving the state without a vital water source as it faced a persistent drought.

The effect on the state has been substantial. Five San Joaquin Valley counties reported last month that their agricultural losses from the water shortage could reach $1.4 billion. Many water agencies have raised rates and started rationing. But the delta's environmental woes also have a cost: The state's salmon industry has shut down for two years running, causing losses exceeding $500 million for that period.

The state should start by finding a way to channel water around the delta, which would keep the much-needed supplies flowing south. And that step would let the state address the environmental needs without those steps affecting water exports. Preserving the status quo is not a realistic option; neither is cutting off water exports to the rest of the state.

And while California may well need more dams and reservoirs, as the governor argues, that is a discussion for later. Changing precipitation patterns will require the state to catch and store more winter rains in the future. But the projects the governor supports have not even completed feasibility and environmental reports yet. And new reservoirs will accomplish little if the state has no way to get the water to the rest of California.

The delta's troubles and their effect on water supplies are the crucial issues. The Legislature should resolve those questions first, and not dive into another futile political standoff.