Search PE.com Search WEB SEARCH by YAHOO!

Water duty

Download story podcast

10:00 PM PDT on Monday, September 14, 2009

The Press-Enterprise

The last minutes of the legislative session are a terrible time to craft sensible policy, and the failure of a series of water bills last week is not surprising. But political stalemate is not an acceptable response to drought and reduced water exports.

The Legislature needs to set aside old ideological conflicts when the politicians return to Sacramento, and focus on the central issue: solving the crisis in the state's primary water system. Legislators also need to create a more sensible way to pay for the solutions than the plan proposed last week.

The failed package would have created a new delta oversight council, increased conservation and expanded monitoring of water use. The legislation also included a $12 billion bond.

The state's top water priority should be the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, the main conduit for water exports from Northern California. Water from the delta serves two-thirds of the state's population and irrigates millions of acres of agriculture.

But using the delta as a channel for water exports is unsustainable: The delta is nearing ecological collapse, and in 2007, a federal court slashed water exports to protect an endangered fish.

California should find a way to channel water exports around the delta. That step would allow the state to deal with the estuary's environmental woes while keeping the much-needed water supplies flowing reliably. Cutting off water shipments to the rest of the state is not a realistic option.

And the Legislature needs to avoid letting a dispute over new dams continue to obstruct delta solutions. Dealing with the complex, contentious delta issues will be difficult enough without letting disagreement over dams complicate matters.

The dam discussion is premature, anyway. The state may very well need new dams and reservoirs, as changing precipitation patterns will require collecting and storing more winter rain in the future. But the environmental and feasibility studies for the dams are not even finished yet. Nor will any new dams matter much without addressing the delta first, as there would be no way to get the water to the rest of California.

Legislators also need to reconsider plans for a $12 billion water bond. State finance officials project years of multibillion dollar general fund deficits ahead, and the state will be hard-pressed to cover the debt service on already approved bonds.

Including what the state plans to spend this year, California has nearly $4 billion in previously approved water bond funds available. The state should spend that money before seeking a huge new water bond.

Water users, not the state's general fund, should foot the bill for big water projects, anyway. The state cannot afford to do otherwise. When the borrowing to build the State Water Project is eventually paid off, for example, water agencies will have paid 96 percent of the $6.4 billion cost.

Certainly, there are other water issues that merit attention; more efficient water use will be the bedrock of any long-term strategy. But a solution to the delta crisis is also a necessary part of rational water policy -- and depends on ending the pernicious political stalemate.