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Stalled water measures spur veto threat

Governor wants package passed, on his desk soon

By Michael Gardner
U-T Sacramento Bureau

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SACRAMENTO — A frustrated Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger may threaten to veto dozens of unrelated bills if lawmakers fail to move a stalled water package to his desk in the coming days, according to those close to negotiations.

But those brokering the deal privately warn that such an ultimatum could further poison negotiations already marred by distrust, making it even more challenging to meet his demand.

Before leaving town for a brief recess last Saturday, the Legislature appeared to be inching toward a broad agreement on fixing the San Joaquin-Sacramento Delta, hub of the state's water supply network that extends to San Diego County.

Talks had narrowed to a handful of difficult issues, including a nearly $12 billion bond measure that would have to be sold to voters skeptical of dams and debt. Oversight of ambitious programs to restore the environmentally and economically valuable delta is equally contentious.

But time ran out before legislators could digest complex proposals more than 200 pages long unveiled just hours before adjournment.

Lawmakers expect to be called back to Sacramento soon to reopen the water package. But those votes may not be delivered quick enough for Schwarzenegger, who over the past few years has been embarrassed by the failure of one of his administration's top priorities.

Water interests privately say they are picking up subtle hints that the governor will veto key legislative priorities unless the water package is passed quickly. By law, Schwarzenegger must act on hundreds of bills no later than Oct. 11.

“The governor will weigh each bill on its merits and act accordingly,” said Aaron McLear, a spokesman. “That said, he believes the Legislature should be focused on negotiating a solution to the state's mounting water crisis.”

Senate President Pro Tempore Darrell Steinberg, D-Sacramento, brushed it off going into another round of talks.

“I just focus on doing the work,” he said.

San Diego area lawmakers involved in drafting water bills say the governor would be making a mistake.

“Sometimes his tactics and antics work at cross purposes to getting good policy done,” said Assemblywoman Mary Salas, D-Chula Vista.

Assemblyman Kevin Jeffries, R-Lake Elsinore said: “It would be self-defeating. I don't see how that motivates the Legislature to work cooperatively with the governor.”

Schwarzenegger has issued similar threats — and followed through — twice in the past 14 months. In August 2008, he promised vetoes if lawmakers did not send him a “responsible budget.” He ended up rejecting dozens of bills.

He delivered another warning Sept. 8 — and then issued a veto — specifically citing water as one of the Legislature's failures.

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