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Schwarzenegger's heavy-handed threat is justified

The governor vows to kill hundreds of bills unless lawmakers deliver a measure on water. The issue justifies the tough stance.

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From Sacramento

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger is threatening to kill hundreds of bills unless the Legislature delivers one bill on water. Is that heavy-handed? No question.

Is it bullying? Sure.

Hostage-taking? Political terrorism? Of course.

Misuse of power? Definitely not.

It is a proper use of power.

It's ugly. But it's an available political tool that the governor would be derelict not to use when an issue as critical as water is at stake.

This isn't about some narrow scheme important only to a narrow interest. Nor is it merely about a governor's pet project -- other than his legacy-building, which should be encouraged as long as it helps the state. It's about finally resolving an acute, decades-old problem that is worsening and affects practically all Californians.

The state water system is clogged and rusting. It's a matter of time before the California aqueduct, which funnels Sierra snow runoff from the Sacramento Valley into the San Joaquin Valley and Southern California, is shut off. The principal water tank, the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, is threatened with potential levee collapses, earthquakes, floods and global warming. And the ecology already is crumbling.

The estuary's fishery is fast disappearing. The endangered delta smelt is a red herring -- a pet target of San Joaquin farmers and the governor who resent federal judges holding back water to save the tiny critter. The real economic tragedy is the decline of the once-abundant king salmon. Their plight has caused a two-year cancellation of commercial fishing for the popular fish, idling boats and shuttering processing plants all along the North Coast.

Nobody argues that the waterworks don't need major repairs and remodeling. But there is a delicate balance that Capitol negotiators have yet to find. It's the balance between investing in a reliable, environmentally friendly water supply and trying to achieve what really must be the state's No. 1 priority: living within its means.

Senate Republicans have proposed a $12.4-billion bond issue that would be paid off by all taxpayers. It would include $4 billion for two or three dams. Additionally, users of the newly developed water would kick in at least that much

dam-building money.

The rest of the bond funds would be available for local projects, the delta, conservation, groundwater protection and removing some small, salmon-blocking dams on the Klamath River.

The bond would not include money for a so-called peripheral canal around the delta. This controversial facility would be financed entirely by water users, including customers of the Metropolitan Water District.

That's too steep a bond for many legislators, who worry about repayments carving a deep hole in the deficit-plagued general fund. Sen. Dave Cogdill of Modesto, the Senate Republicans' go-to guy on water, replies that the bonds could be parceled out over several years. The important thing is to line up the funding authorization for construction projects, he says.

But Assembly Republican Leader Sam Blakeslee of San Luis Obispo disagrees. He would prefer a bond closer to $8 billion.

"We're in the biggest recession of our generation," he says. "We need to spend only what is necessary to solve the problem as quickly as possible . . . without some of the Christmas ornaments and largesse -- a scaled-down package that isn't the ultimate solution for every water problem anyone can imagine, funding every possible stakeholder who has a dog in this hunt."

Democratic leaders basically agree. But they would cut back on dam funding before they would eliminate some of the things Blakeslee would, such as groundwater monitoring and treatment plants. "Much of this bill is a wish list of the far left," the GOP leader asserts. "Frankly, I don't think this is the time for a wish list."

But it also may be the necessary makings of a compromise, trade-offs necessary for environmentalist groups to buy the farm lobby's desired dams.

There's also a battle over who pays -- all taxpayers, or mostly the water users. And who pays for the delta environmental restoration? The public exclusively? Or also the water users who drained the estuary?

These and other arguments -- such as details of a new governing system for the delta -- have raged for years. Schwarzenegger apparently doesn't much care what the Legislature decides. He just wants it to compromise and send him a bill.

The governor demands a deal by Friday night. Or he'll grab the veto pen, he strongly hints and his advisors tell reporters. Sunday night is the deadline for signing or vetoing more than 700 bills.

Is that threat risky? Somewhat. He's swinging a sledgehammer and could wind up dropping it on his foot.

Assembly Democrats "are very angry" at the governor, says Speaker Karen Bass (D-Los Angeles). "I'm trying to hold off their anger. I'm worried about a backlash."

Senate leader Darrell Steinberg (D-Sacramento) calls the governor's extortion "silly."

Even Republican Blakeslee mildly criticizes Schwarzenegger. The bills on his desk should be judged "on their own merit," he says. "Using other criteria is not constructive."

But Blakeslee and Bass doubt Schwarzenegger will carry out the threat. The leaders believe that if the governor and legislators are within striking distance of an agreement -- and they already seem to be -- he'll put away the sledgehammer.

"This is a classic contest of wills between the executive and legislative branches," Blakeslee says. "I don't get too overwrought with some of the positioning and posturing."

But the governor isn't backing down. "It makes sense to use the executive leverage," says Matt David, his chief

spokesman. "He's going to use everything at his disposal."

That's what it's for.

For years, many people -- myself included -- have carped at Schwarzenegger for not using all the powers of his office. We shouldn't complain now that he's using the most potent power.

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