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California's Water - A vanishing resource

Ambitious overhaul of state water system in works

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U-T Sacramento Bureau

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WHAT'S NEXT

Hearings: The first Assembly-Senate informational meeting on key elements is expected tomorrow. No vote is planned.

Governor: Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and lawmakers will continue to negotiate the policy and spending package over the coming weeks.

Voters: If a compromise is struck in the Capitol, voters must approve a bond measure to raise money for new projects. The election would be in June or November of next year.

SACRAMENTO — Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and lawmakers are laboring over an ambitious package of policy and spending initiatives that could transform — from dam to tap — how California uses its limited water supply.

If the changes happen, most residents and businesses probably would have to pay more and consume less.

For the first time, statewide law would require farmers to pay a premium if they draw too much water. Among the dozens of potential directives is a proposal for urban customers, including those in the San Diego region, to wring at least 5 percent more in water conservation.

Longer term, the area's water agencies might be able to compete for billions in state grants to build more storage facilities, invigorate conservation and extend alternative supplies, such as desalination.

In return, the state expects to make progress toward rebuilding a crumbling and undersized water supply system that's overly strained even during normal periods of rain and snow.

Carrying out the full set of measures is estimated to cost billions of dollars, but no firm price tag has been established.

The outlook for overcoming years of deadlock isn't promising, even after three straight years of drought. Lawmakers, farmers, environmentalists and water agencies are being challenged to bridge long-standing divisions over new reservoirs, fish and wildlife protection, conservation mandates and whether the state should take on more debt amid financially trying times.

Yet there does appear to be a growing realization that the choice is to confront the water crisis now or risk widespread economic and environmental catastrophe later.

“Water has been considered the most unsolvable issue in this state,” said Senate President Pro Tempore Darrell Steinberg, D-Sacramento. “We believe we are on the verge of breaking that barrier.”

Senate Republican Leader Dennis Hollingsworth, who represents parts of northern San Diego County, warns that tough negotiations are ahead. But “each side is moving closer together,” he said.

If approved, the package would represent the most significant redirection of water policy and resources since 1960, when voters approved the State Water Project and its network of reservoirs and pipes.

Details remain sketchy as legislative leaders and special-interest groups continue to huddle, aiming to unveil more details this week. The agenda includes hashing out a range of policy initiatives and determining the size and scope of a bond measure — exceeding $9 billion — to pay for the most expensive projects.

As it stands now, local water agencies likely would be required to provide matching grants to qualify for revenue from state bonds. That might force some of them to boost rates.

“The costs will have to be built into rates as we go forward,” said Roger Patterson, assistant general manager of the Metropolitan Water District. But water prices probably won't spike because bond repayment and other costs will be spread over 30 years, he added.

Of immediate consequence is the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, one of the nation's most fragile estuaries. It doubles as the hub of the state's water supply.

“A decade ago, we were talking about a risk that the delta estuary would collapse,” said Barry Nelson, an analyst for the Natural Resources Defense Council. “Today, it has collapsed. We run the risk of extinctions and potentially the permanent loss of the California salmon fishing industry.”

The legislative package would inject billions of dollars into repairs for the delta, from saving endangered fish to fixing crumbling levees, while charting new courses for its use and growth.

San Diego County draws about a third of its annual water supply from the delta, a 1,100 mile maze of waterways roughly the size of Rhode Island.

Spending — in terms of amounts and priorities — will be a difficult issue for lawmakers to resolve, much less sell to debt-wary voters as part of a bond ballot measure in 2010.

“Given the financial frailty of our state budget, we want to make certain we spend no more than what is necessary to solve the problem at hand,” said Assembly Republican Leader Sam Blakeslee of San Luis Obispo.

Fiscal frugality aside, Blakeslee and his allies plan to hold out for at least $3 billion to build reservoirs, possibly at sites east of Fresno and north of Sacramento.

“We have a system that has just not kept up with the times,” said Danny Merkley, a lobbyist for the California Farm Bureau Federation. “That includes environmental needs. That includes changes in weather patterns. That includes changes in population. We simply cannot conserve our way out of the current situation.”

Steinberg, the Senate leader, cautions that new dams aren't a given.

“It doesn't preordain dams. It simply says that storage projects have the ability to compete for a pot of money,” Steinberg said. “The competition will be based on which project brings the most public benefit.”

Jim Metropulos of Sierra Club California is leery of reservoirs, as well as other elements in the package that he fears

could compromise commitments to fish and wildlife protection.

“When have the 1,200 dams we have ever been run to benefit the environment?” he asked.

One common thread is the theme of doing more with less. Schwarzenegger and others are looking for extensive statewide consumption cuts by 2020, but would leave compliance up to individual water agencies.

Legislators also are targeting water use for agriculture, though they're not prescribing precise benchmarks for conservation. Instead, growers would have to implement specific water-saving practices. Most important, they might have to choose between curbing usage or paying more — an approach common in thirsty cities.

The strategy has drawn first-blush interest from some Republican leaders. “The most powerful means of producing sensitivity to use is increasing the price,” Blakeslee said.

Depending on how the measure is crafted, a newly created authority with unprecedented powers over the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta may be given a role in determining the size and site for a proposed north-to-south canal. The canal would carry water to San Joaquin Valley farms and Southern California cities.

The Metropolitan Water District worries that authority influence could undermine the project after it has secured all the necessary environmental permits. For several years, Metropolitan and others have been working with state and federal agencies on a proposed route and size for the canal.

“We want to make sure that if we go through the hoops and expense, we can move ahead,” Patterson said.

Ed Manning, who represents the giant farm-based Westlands Water District, said finding a way to move water through the delta while safeguarding fish and wildlife must be the cornerstone of any broader deal.

“The key to making everything work is conveyance,” he said.

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