

Despite dam-building, enviros pump money into governor's water bond

Lance Williams, California Watch, 8-6-10

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's plan for a \$11.4 billion state water bond – conceived last summer in the third year of a crippling drought – is on the bubble, as the San Diego Union Tribune's copy desk has punned.

The ballot measure was intended to restore the collapsing ecosystem of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, promote water conservation and, not incidentally, build a giant dam on the San Joaquin upstream of the mammoth Friant Dam in Fresno County.

Analysts concerned with California's fiscal health wondered whether a state already staggering under the burden of a multibillion-dollar deficit should saddle itself with billions in new debt.

Meanwhile, the dam proposal roused the ire of the Sierra Club and a long list of other green groups. They noted that most western states are demolishing dams out of environmental concerns, not putting up new ones.

The measure wasn't polling well, and now the governor wants to pull Proposition 18 off the November ballot, and pencil it in for 2011, after he's out of office.

Meanwhile, the water bond's political committee put together a \$1 million campaign war chest. Part of the money – directly and indirectly – came from environmentalist groups that aren't troubled by more dam-building in California.

The Conservation Action Fund, a Los Angeles-based political committee, put \$210,000 into the governor's water bond measure. (In 2006, the fund pumped \$2.6 million into Proposition 84, a \$5.4 billion water bond measure in 2006.)

The Wildland Support Fund, a San Francisco-based nonprofit set up by Orange County hedge fund millionaire David Gelbaum, donated \$84,891 more, records show. The Nature Conservancy, the nonprofit that buys scenic properties threatened by development, put in a paltry \$395, records show.

But while the water bond was being contemplated, the Nature Conservancy donated an additional \$400,000 to the Conservation Action Fund. During the same period, the Wildland Support Fund donated an additional \$62,864 to the Conservation Action Fund.

The consumer group Food & Water Watch, which opposes Prop. 18, contends that some green organizations lining up behind the water bond could benefit from its passage.

“These interests could indirectly receive as much as \$1 billion in grants from the bonds for land purchases, ecosystem restoration and related projects,” Food & Water Watch wrote in a detailed analysis of Prop. 18 fundraising released yesterday.

The Nature Conservancy has said it supports the water bond as an “ambitious, comprehensive approach to state water management.”

Otherwise, financial support for the bonds has come from big growers, the construction industry, developers and the governor's “California Dream Team” PAC, the consumers group concludes.