

State water bond supporters want delay

James Rufus Koren, Ontario Inland Valley Daily Bulletin, 7-9-10

If California voters don't approve a massive bond measure to pay for, among other things, more water storage facilities across the state, Kathy Rietkerk of Kallisto Greenhouses is afraid there won't be enough water for her to stay in business.

Which is why, strangely, she hopes lawmakers can agree to postpone a vote on that ballot measure - scheduled to be on November's ballot - by two years.

"The state's water infrastructure is in desperate need of improvement," said Rietkerk, who grows tropical house plants in her Fontana greenhouses. "And delaying the bond vote puts that infrastructure further out. But we wouldn't want to see (the bond) fail."

While local farmers and the San Bernardino County Farm Bureau say the state needs more water storage, they say the recession and California's budget crisis dim the chances of the bond measure passing in November.

That's why, last week, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and state Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg said they want to put the bond vote off until 2012. Schwarzenegger, farmers and some local lawmakers say that will boost the bond's chances. Bond opponents, meanwhile, say they want the legislature to scrap the current bond package and start over.

"The likelihood the bond will pass in the midst of a deep depression is a concern," Rietkerk said. "And if the state had exercised some fiscal responsibility over the last few years, the bond would have a much better chance."

Moving the bond vote would require a two-thirds vote from both the state Senate and Assembly. It's not yet clear where Assembly Speaker John Perez, D-Los Angeles, stands on the move.

Sen. Bob Huff, R-Walnut, said he agrees that the vote should be postponed.

"The economy is still a little iffy," he said. "Water's not the first thing on people's minds."

That's true for many Californians, but not for farmers, said Patricia Van Dam, an owner of Two B Dairy in Ontario.

"Most people turn on the tap and water comes out," she said. "Farmers turn on the tap, and no water comes out. We feel it more than the public at large."

She, like Rietkerk, wants the bond to pass and thinks the state needs more water storage - reservoirs, dams, underground aquifers - to ensure a stable water supply that can support California residents and agriculture.

But she also says now is the wrong time.

"The public doesn't really want to spend any money," Van Dam said. "I believe they know it's necessary, but after this wet winter, people have a short memory."

Gayle Learned, executive director of the San Bernardino County Farm Bureau, said, "It's the right bill, but it's the wrong time."

Opponents of the bond, though, say it's not the right bill.

Conner Everts, a spokesman for the Southern California Watershed Alliance, one of the groups campaigning against the bond package, said it doesn't make sense to postpone a vote on the bond without addressing what he and other opponents see as wasteful spending and other problems.

Critics have said the bond package was thrown together and is full of "pork-barrel" spending. Others have said it doesn't properly address environmental concerns.

"The only way to deal with it is to scrap it and start over and have it really be a discussion about how to spend this money," Everts said. "If we just postpone it, we're not dealing with the issue."

Moving the vote could be seen as a victory for bond backers, but that could throw the bond into a less-stable political climate. By 2012, a new governor will be in office and new crop of legislators will be in Sacramento.

Douglas Johnson, a researcher with the Rose Institute of State and Local Government at Claremont McKenna College, said this year's gubernatorial race is the biggest wild card.

"I'm sure (candidates Edmund G. "Jerry" Brown and Meg Whitman) will differ on it, yet where either stands is a huge question mark," he said.