

Wolk bill to reduce reliance on freshwater from Delta moves forward

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SACRAMENTO -- The Senate Natural Resources and Water Committee voted 5-3 last week to approve legislation by Senator Lois Wolk (D-Davis) to reduce the state's reliance on freshwater from the fragile Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta watershed.

"My legislation would ensure that state investments in regional water supply reliability are directed to the most efficient and strategic projects, consistent with state policy to reduce reliance on freshwater exported from the Delta watershed," Wolk said. "The bill also promotes regional self-sufficiency."

Wolk's Senate Bill 834 will utilize Integrated Regional Water Management Plans as a tool to implement the state policy, established in 2009, of reducing reliance on freshwater exported from the Delta. The bill is supported by Sierra Club California and Planning and Conservation League, and will next be heard on the Senate Floor.

The committee also voted 5-3 to approve another water measure by Wolk, SB 571, which would establish a more transparent and fair mechanism for prioritizing funding for water projects throughout the state. The bill is based largely on a report from the independent, bipartisan Little Hoover Commission, "Managing for Change: Modernizing California's Water Governance," and also addresses recommendations by the State Treasurer's Office and the State Auditor.

"My intent is to model a new system of water investment after the state's transportation funding system, which works very well when it comes to determining state, regional, and local priorities," Wolk said. "This legislation would incorporate input from the integrated water management plans, which provide a local voice for funding priorities at the state level."

Among those testifying in support of the bill was Stuart Drown, executive director of the Little Hoover Commission, who referred to two separate commission reports that found overreliance on general obligation bonds to fund for ongoing state water programs--as well as a lack of oversight for bond expenditures.

"Unlike in transportation and school construction, in the water realm, the state has lacked an entity to set priorities for bond expenditures and to ensure that programs are coordinated and do not conflict," said Drown, who said that SB 571 would ensure independent oversight for existing natural resources bonds.

The bill, which is also supported by the Planning and Conservation League, will next be heard in Senate Appropriations Committee.