

State has tools to balance water needs

Geoff Johnson, Woodland Daily Democrat, 3-9-11

California has enough trouble balancing a budget. Can it balance water needs?

Timothy Quinn, executive director of the Association of California Water Agencies, thinks the state at least has the right tools to do so.

On Monday, Quinn spoke at a meeting of the Water Resources Association of Yolo County and gave his case for the 2009 Comprehensive Water Package. The bills, together with the Delta Stewardship Council they created, have given the state the framework it needs to make Delta conveyance more environmentally friendly and address the long-standing water debate, he said.

Many of the proposals are linked to a yet-to-be-balloted \$11 billion bond.

Of the funding, \$4 billion will be doled out at the local level to deal with water resources; another \$4 billion will be reserved for watershed protection; and \$3 billion will be set aside for water storage.

Key to the bill package is the philosophy that the state can't solve its problems just by directing funding toward just one of these issues. The package covers everything from drought relief to groundwater monitoring to water recycling.

"The only option is to check all of the above," he said.

Some legislators have pushed for a smaller bond. But the strain on California's water supply is likely to worsen as its population grows and the state needs to act now, Quinn said.

"The worst mistake we could make would be not to implement a solution because we think we can't afford it," he said.

If stopping or dropping the plan outlined in the package for fear of funding is the worst-case scenario for Quinn, a "civil war" also ranks high on his fears.

If major groups with a stake in the future of California's water refuse to concede to one another, it could stall progress and create a no-win situation, he said.

One measure taken to avoid that in the package is a law requiring the state to consider water conveyance "coequal" with environmental goals. Neither is supposed to be given favor over the other, he said.

Water allocations to agriculture are still part of the debate.

"Just because you're a farmer ... and you're paranoid, doesn't mean they're not out to get you," he said.

The good news for farmers is that the dialogue is beyond some agricultural myths, including the idea that the state could solve its water problems solely by having farmers cut back water use by 10 percent, he said.

Ideally, Quinn said the state should provide market incentives for conservation, providing either funding or using fees to promote everything from using native plants instead of old-fashioned, thirsty lawns to low-water washing machines.

How the governor approaches all this remains to be seen but Quinn said Jerry Brown is the man for the job. Brown introduced an approach to water decades ahead of his time the first time around, Quinn said.

"I can't think of a better governor to negotiate this deal than the one we've got now," he said.