

Brown enters hostile territory to push controversial water plan

David Siders, Sacramento Bee, 2-7-13

COLUSA – Gov. Jerry Brown knew the room was against him when he showed up for a farm show here Wednesday.

But Brown has a controversial water project to promote and is trying to make inroads in rural California. He put on a flannel shirt and opened with a joke.

"I checked out the voting history of Colusa County," Brown said.

Not only has the county opposed the Democratic governor every time he has been on a ballot, Brown said, but it overwhelmingly voted against a similar, unsuccessful, water plan Brown championed when he was governor before, in 1982.

"The vote in Colusa County was 3.6 percent 'yes,' Brown said in a breakfast address. "So, guys, I've got some work to do."

Later – after Brown had toured the farm show, sat on a tractor and announced that he will build a house on family land nearby – even his second cousin's reaction suggested how difficult it may be for Brown to find support among area farmers for his \$14 billion plan. Brown is proposing to build two tunnels to divert water around the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta to the south.

"The tunnels, I don't know," said the relative, Walt Seaver, a Brown appointee to the local fair board. "I think everybody's waiting to see what the final version's really going to be."

Brown's effort is a massive and uncertain undertaking. Yet the Democratic governor is in a politically favorable position following passage of his November ballot initiative to raise taxes. Jack Citrin, director of the Institute of Governmental Studies at UC Berkeley, said he appears to have "a lot of confidence in his persuasive powers right now."

Appearing at a farm show in a rural, relatively tiny county is indicative of how significant the project is to the governor.

Brown said there are deep divisions "between north and south, between farmers and environmentalists, between people living in the Delta and people living ... further down south. But I intend to meet with all the groups, conduct a very intensive, prolonged and complete effort of involvement and listening and taking into account what people suggest."

Brown said he will be "coming back a lot to make sure that any concerns and objections can be handled."

The governor and other supporters of the project say a Delta conveyance is needed to improve the reliability of a water supply used by some 25 million Californians, while critics say it will harm the Delta ecosystem and the area's farm economy.

State Sen. Jim Nielsen, R-Gerber, was a major opponent of the peripheral canal that Brown proposed when he was governor before. Nielsen said sentiment in his district, which includes Colusa, has not changed.

offering assurances that their water will be protected," Nielsen said.

Karm Bains, a farmer appointed by Brown to the Yuba-Sutter fair board, said as he walked with the governor through the farm show that Brown's plan is a good one but that it may still result in a compromise.

"It's a sensitive issue, but it's something that's inevitable," said Bains, who described Brown as a friend and said his family farms throughout the state.

Brown has frequently mentioned – both in speeches and in financial disclosure statements – the ranch west of Williams that has been in his family for generations.

On Wednesday, Brown provided more details about his ownership interest in the property and said he plans to build a house there.

"I'm thinking of a house where I can bring my relatives over and we can have Thanksgiving dinner, and I can get a little quiet," Brown told reporters.

Asked if it would be a home to move into in retirement, the 74-year-old governor said, "Who's talking about retirement?"

"Certainly, it's a good retreat for a governor," he said.

Brown has often told audiences about his maternal great-grandfather, August Schuckman, who left Germany in 1848, crossed the Great Plains and eventually settled in California in 1852. Brown said Wednesday that he persuaded his mother to sign over the property to him.

"I told her, we're not selling," Brown said. "I said we're going to protect that land, and I promise you today we're going to protect the water on that land, and we're going to protect the water in this county."

Brown said he owns 27 percent of the 2,700-acre property, and he estimated the land's total worth at a "couple of million." Other family members own an additional 27 percent, Brown said, giving the family a majority interest.

Brown has lived in San Francisco and Los Angeles, among other places. It is unclear when he might start building on the ranch.

"We're planning," he said. "There's a lot of sites, as you can imagine. ... There's one site where I can see Mount Shasta to the north and the Sierra to the west."

In that one small corner of Colusa County, Brown said, he may have political support.

Williams, he said, "where my grandmother was born and is buried ... actually gave me a margin of 26 votes over Meg Whitman, so everybody here from Williams, thanks a lot, guys."

Following Brown's address, he made small talk with farmers and exhibitors as he strode through the grounds. Brown ate a few prunes, asked about machinery and appeared all but ready, at one booth, to purchase a flagpole.

At the suggestion of first lady Anne Gust Brown, the governor put his dog, Sutter, on a tractor. His wife told