

Gov. Brown puts a price tag on protecting major water supply

Julie Small, KPCC (Pasadena NPR), 1-25-13

In his State of the State address Thursday, Gov. Jerry Brown reiterated his pitch to protect California's water supply. But in a speech lawmakers repeatedly interrupted with applause, Brown's plea to spend billions on water elicited silence. He was speaking to a joint session of the legislature, but his message is really for consumers — and the agencies that supply water to them.

"My proposed plan is two tunnels, 30 miles long and 40 feet wide, designed to improve the ecology of the Delta, with almost 100 square miles of habitat restoration," Brown said. "Yes, that's big, but so is the problem."

Brown said the plan is designed to protect the Delta's water supply from an earthquake, a hundred-year storm or a rise in sea levels. The project would cost an estimated \$14 billion to construct the tunnels, and \$5 billion to operate them. So who foots the bill?

"About 23 million people around the state who get their water at least partially or wholly from the Delta," says Richard Stapler with the California Natural Resources Agency.

It would benefit consumers in the San Francisco Bay Area, the Central Valley, and in Los Angeles and San Diego.

"It's a massive part of the state," said Stapler, "and a very important part of maintaining and growing our economy is keeping this water supply secure and reliable."

Consumers would pay, but they don't get to decide whether to build the Governor's tunnels. Water suppliers make that call and pass the cost on to their customers.

"The actual cost to consumers in Southern California would be something in the range of a little over \$5 a month," said Jeffrey Kightlinger of the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California.

Kightlinger says this isn't a new concept for water agencies. They ponied up to build the state waterworks back in the 1960s — a project championed by Jerry Brown's father, then-Governor Pat Brown.

"We paid for that," Kightlinger said. "The State of California issued the bonds, and the water agencies signed contracts committing to pay off those bonds and it was a long-term, 75-year commitment. So this is kind of a repeat of that 1960s strategy that Pat Brown put in play."

Consumers have some say in the matter: they elect representatives to their local water boards.

The General Manager for the Long Beach Water Department declined to comment on Brown's plan, and the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power did not immediately return calls.

The project would have to complete environmental impact reports and win a host of state and federal permits before construction can begin.

Stapler said the Natural Resources Agency expects to issue a revised plan to water agencies in February or March, and continue to look at other options.