

Workshops look at water bond storage spending

Kate Campbell, Ag Alert, 8-5-15

Nine months after California voters passed the Proposition 1 water bond, the California Water Commission is conducting public workshops to discuss how bond money for water storage projects might be spent. The \$7.12 billion bond measure includes \$2.7 billion set aside for the public benefit of water storage projects.

At a workshop in Davis last week, commission officials indicated it will be several years before regulations and programs are finalized, and storage project proposals can be submitted.

Under the bond's provisions, water projects that meet stringent "public benefit" criteria—such as bolstering ecosystems, bettering water quality, controlling floods and improving recreation—may begin applying for available bond funding as early as Jan. 1, 2017.

The application process for getting public benefit projects approved and funded from the bond will require a "variable" number of years beyond that, commission representatives said.

A questioner who attended the Davis workshop asked: "Does that mean five or more years from now to get a project approved, and many years beyond that to complete it?" The answer: "Yes."

Proposition 1—the Water Quality, Supply, and Infrastructure Improvement Act of 2014—requires development and adoption of project solicitation and evaluation guidelines, which will be vetted through a series of public comment meetings before being finalized.

The next public workshop will be held Aug. 10, from 6 to 8 p.m., at the Bakersfield Senior Center, 530 4th St. in Bakersfield.

"It's important for Farm Bureau members to remind the Water Commission about the need for significant new water storage projects," California Farm Bureau Federation Administrator Rich Matteis said. "The workshops provide an opportunity for Farm Bureau members to ask questions and provide advice about potential projects that would benefit from bond funding."

Marin County rancher Sam Dolcini, who attended a separate workshop in Napa last week, said the meetings offer "a huge opportunity for agriculture's voice to be heard."

Dolcini said much of the discussion at the workshop focused on "process and procedures," but noted that the commission remains at the beginning of its storage-approval procedure.

"At this point in the commission's program development, it's important to participate," said Dolcini, who is president of the Marin County Farm Bureau, adding that he felt it is "important for California agriculture to be present."

Dolcini said he found it interesting that when officials were asked at the Napa meeting about the goal for how much water a \$2.7 billion investment might provide, there wasn't a specific answer.

"I think it's a great question: Do we have a water goal for these project investments?" Dolcini said. "Look, we've got \$2.7 billion to invest and not a goal in sight. That's one reason why farmers and ranchers need to be at the table as the project allocation process begins."

Proposition 1 requires the commission to rank projects based on the expected return for public investment as measured by the magnitude of public benefits provided by the projects, but officials said that doesn't translate into a certain number of acre-feet of water. The commission must also develop and adopt methods for quantifying and managing public benefits.

As required by the bond measure, the commission must consider a wide range of proposed projects that may be eligible for funding, including:

- Surface storage projects identified in the Cal-Fed Bay-Delta Program Record of Decision;
- Groundwater storage projects;
- Groundwater contamination prevention or remediation projects with water storage benefits;
- Conjunctive use projects;
- Reservoir re-operation projects;
- Local surface storage projects that improve the operation of water systems in the state and provide public benefits;
- Regional surface storage projects that improve the operation of water systems.

The commission said in a meeting handout that the maximum state cost-share for public benefits of a project is 50 percent and to qualify for funding, ecosystem benefits must be 50 percent of the funded public benefits. The remaining money for storage projects must come from local or other sources.

Dolcini said when asked about specific project proposals at the Napa meeting, officials said they've heard that as many as 140 proposals could be put forward. However, proposals will not be considered before 2017.

Sonoma County farmer Tito Sasaki, who also attended the Napa meeting, said most of the discussion at the workshop focused on the potential environmental benefits of projects but that to him, the most important thing about the bond funding is to improve the state's water reliability and delivery system.

"It's going to be a long process, and farmers and ranchers need to participate," he said.