

State needs to deliver on water storage promise

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A chorus of voices is starting to build, demanding accountability in state government, but so far a suddenly important state agency has been tone deaf. It's time for Gov. Jerry Brown to start singing.

People are getting antsy for good reason. Last fall Brown, many state legislators and a broad coalition of groups and organizations lobbied for the passage of Proposition 1, a state water bond with \$7.1 billion in benefits.

A key component of the bond was \$2.7 billion for water storage. The campaign pitches said that could mean seed money for one or two reservoirs. Sites Reservoir west of Maxwell and Temperance Flat on the upper San Joaquin River were the most likely to be built with the bond, just because both are farther along in the process. They have been studied for more than a decade.

The bond passed easily. Not many people were skeptical that the state wouldn't deliver on its promises, but we were, if only because the decision-making body that would decide how the \$2.7 billion would be spent is an obscure board called the California Water Commission.

The board is not an elected body. It's appointed by the governor. And it can interpret "water storage" however it wants. It could be underground storage in the desert or groundwater banks in the valley. Reservoirs don't necessarily have to be built with the money, though that's certainly what voters have every right to expect.

The commission finally met in late January and its chairman caused a stir when he said they're in no hurry. He said no money needed to be allocated for two years, and the commission would take two years to figure things out.

In our minds, that's unacceptable. People have been working on this problem long before the California Water Commission was entrusted to act.

After being quiet about the issue entirely too long, legislators are starting to speak up. At a legislative hearing last week, politicians got a chance to voice their concerns and apply pressure. They made it clear that the commission needs to be accountable to the voters.

The state hasn't built a reservoir in decades and now there's finally money to do so, thanks to voters. If the state doesn't use the funding as voters intended, it'll be several more decades before something gets done.

Republicans and Democrats were vocal that their constituents expect action.

Said Assemblyman Bill Dodd, D-Napa: "I too am very, very concerned about the fact that if we get to the end and we don't have one of these big reservoirs done or two of them done, people are going to say, 'You guys just blew that money.' People voted for water storage."

State Sen. Jim Nielsen, R-Gerber, wants to step up public pressure with a Senate oversight hearing on the water bond. He would like to invite leaders from agriculture, labor and business so they can be heard.

Assemblyman James Gallagher, R-Nicolaus, introduced a bill that would expedite environmental review

of water storage projects that receive bond money in an attempt to move things along.

All are welcome moves. But the simple fact is, the California Water Commission can sit on its hands as long as it wants. The commission is not accountable to the voters, only to the person who appoints them — the governor.

Well, Brown campaigned for the water bond and signed the ballot argument in favor of it for all voters to see. Increased water storage was a key component of his argument.

“Water storage is key and we haven’t added any new storage in 30 years,” he wrote.

It’s time for Brown to refresh the California Water Commission’s memory on the promises that were made to voters. It appears Brown’s voice might be the only one that commissioners can hear.