

Jerry Brown unveils proposal on how to start spending \$7.5 billion water bond

Paul Rogers, Bay Area News Group, 1-10-15

Two months ago, in the grip of a historic drought, California voters overwhelmingly approved a \$7.5 billion water bond to fund everything from new storage projects to modernizing drinking water treatment plants.

On Friday, as part of his budget proposal, Gov. Jerry Brown identified how he would like the first wave of that money to be spent. State residents expecting construction on huge new reservoirs will have to wait, however.

Brown's budget -- much of which is expected to be approved by the Democratic-controlled Legislature in Sacramento -- calls for spending \$532 million from the water bond, which was Proposition 1. The main areas where he would allocate money this year:

- ◆ \$178 million for restoring streams, rivers and watersheds, the source of much of the state's water.
- ◆ \$137 million for water recycling projects, in which sewage is treated to high levels to be reused for landscape irrigation and other non-drinkable uses, freeing up other supplies for drinking.
- ◆ \$135 million for upgrading drinking water treatment plants and wastewater plants.
- ◆ \$23 million for funding water conservation projects, such as rebates for people buying water-efficient appliances.
- ◆ \$22 million for groundwater management and cleanup.

The most controversial part of the water bond, which voters approved by 67 percent, was whether to spend money building new reservoirs. Although many of the state's largest environmental groups, such as the Nature Conservancy, in the end endorsed the measure, some critics said the money would be spent on taxpayer-subsidized dams to continue providing cheap water for corporate farmers in the Central Valley who are growing water-intensive crops like almonds to ship to China.

The bond earmarked \$2.7 billion for "storage," although it left the definition vague. "Storage" could mean construction of one or more new large reservoirs, but it also could mean increasing storage underground, in managed aquifers.

The decision on how to spend that money will come from the California Water Commission, an obscure agency whose nine members are appointed by the governor. The commission has not yet taken any votes on how to spend the money from the November bond.

Mark Cowin, director of the Department of Water Resources, said Friday that he expects the commission will make a decision by 2017. He noted that the commission has a timetable spelled out in the bond language to write regulations defining how to rank projects by the "public benefits" they provide.

Despite a wet December, California remains in a serious drought, with the Sierra snowpack at only 40 percent of normal and major reservoirs less than half full. Brown was asked about the storage issue at a

news conference Friday morning, but didn't address specifics about how, when or whether the state will be building new reservoirs.

"We have a lot of different programs that we are going to spend on this year," the governor said. "We have a very good array of things we are doing."