

New California water bond seeks to plug funding holes

Rory Carroll, Reuters, 9-25-15

California environmentalists plan to file a new water bond proposal with the secretary of state next week, a measure backers say will provide critical money for programs that were under funded by the \$7.8 billion bond passed by voters last year.

The exact amount of the new water bond has yet to be determined but will be less than \$5 billion, Jerry Meral, director of the California water program at the Natural Heritage Institute, told Reuters this week.

If backers can collect the necessary number of signatures, the proposal will be put to voters during the November 2016 election, when voter turnout is expected to be high.

"We believe the voters understand the very serious nature of the drought and would be willing to invest in a water bond that produces actual water to help meet their needs," Meral said.

The new bond would fund storm water systems to catch rainfall, wastewater recycling facilities, and efforts aimed at desalting groundwater and brackish water, according to a draft of the proposal dated Sept. 23.

It would also provide funds for seismic upgrades and fix other problems at flood control dams.

"At present these dams cannot hold back flood waters long enough to put them to productive use," Meral said. "By repairing them storage would be increased and water supplies augmented."

Water bonds have become standard practice in California, where voters approved 20 water bonds over the past few decades to address problems. Only one water bond has been defeated in the state's history.

"The voters know this is a dry state, very much prone to droughts, and increasingly subject to water supply variability due to climate change," Meral said.

The water bond proposal comes as California reels from its worst drought in over a century. Ongoing dry conditions led Governor Jerry Brown earlier this year to impose the first mandatory water reductions in state history.

Democratic state senator Lois Wolk, a key proponent of last year's water bond, known as Proposition 1, said lawmakers should be cautious about over reliance on bonds.

"Bond funding alone is not going to fix the staggering ongoing costs for deferred maintenance and operations of our state and local aging and deteriorating water systems," she said.

"California needs to take a hard look at these growing, ongoing needs and have the difficult conversation about how to meet those needs and fund them now and in the future," she said.