

California Governor Brown pushes big water project amid drought

Sharon Bernstein, Reuters News, 1-14-16

SACRAMENTO, Calif. - California Governor Jerry Brown warned on Thursday of near-apocalyptic water shortages if his \$15 billion plan to divert water from a Northern California river for use elsewhere gets bogged down in political and environmental disputes.

The plan to remove water north of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, the fragile source of much of the state's drinking water, is opposed by many environmentalists, but Brown insisted it was crucial in shoring up water supplies in the drought-plagued state.

"If we don't have the project, the delta will fail, water will not be available and California will suffer devastating economic consequences," Brown, a Democrat, told a meeting of water regulators and utility executives in Sacramento to discuss the state's progress in stabilizing its water system.

The plan calls for digging a pair of tunnels under the delta. They would carry water from the Sacramento River to the state's agricultural breadbasket as well as cities in the central and southern parts of America's most populous state.

The governor's proposal, which must go through an environmental review and permitting process, has reignited California's century-old water wars, sparked when Los Angeles siphoned water from the Owens Valley north of the city to slake the thirst of the growing Southern California metropolis.

California Governor Edmund "Jerry" Brown attends a meeting during the World Climate Change ...

Opponents have said the plan will imperil salmon, trout and the endangered delta smelt, damage the delta's role as a center for water recreation and sport fishing, and could ultimately reduce the availability of drinking water for Northern California cities.

Brown, who has backing from labor, utilities, moderate Democrats and many Republicans, has said the project will protect the delta while ensuring an adequate water supply.

But opponents said the project would harm the ecosystem.

"How will the delta ever recover if freshwaters are never allowed to flow through it, even in rainy seasons," said Barbara Barrigan-Parrilla, director of the Restore the Delta group.

Backers estimate construction would take at least 10 years after the necessary approvals are received, barring lawsuits and other actions to try to slow the project.