

How California's water storage project rules are falling short

Kim Delfino, The Sacramento Bee, 11-11-16

In California, innovation is the name of the game. Just as we're leading the way in clean energy development, we can also lead the way in innovative water management.

Yet, we also have a long history of water wars. While we've supplied a lot of water to farms and cities, we've done a lot of damage to our fisheries and natural ecosystems. We have built many publicly funded dams and reservoirs, which have wiped out native salmon runs, starved wetlands of water, tarnished pristine rivers and inundated sacred lands.

In 2014, voters passed Proposition 1, which charts a different path. It entrusts the California Water Commission with \$2.7 billion in bonds for new water storage projects that must result in environmental benefits, such as improved river flows, enhanced flood protection and improved water quality.

When I joined the commission, I believed we would lead on innovative water storage solutions. Now I am watching with great interest as it finalizes rules on how to invest nearly \$3 billion in improved water storage projects.

But the draft rules discussed by the commission last Thursday fall short in encouraging innovative, effective water storage projects that will also benefit the environment. On Tuesday, the commission has an opportunity to decide whether innovation or "business as usual" will rule California's water management.

As they stand now, the proposed regulations would allow some storage projects to receive funding for essentially following already established law. Where is the public benefit or innovation in that? Where is the commission going above and beyond to balance water storage with environmental protections?

Developers should instead use Proposition 1 funding to ensure their projects provide for clean water and healthy ecosystems, which ultimately make for a healthy public life.

The draft regulations also fall short by short-circuiting analysis that would help commissioners gauge how projects could potentially help us adapt to climate change. It is far better to assess the best available climate science before building new, large and costly infrastructure that may sit half-empty while also increasing potential risks and damage to our environment.

Instead, the commission can make a difference in water management by investing in cost-effective storage solutions such as replenishing underground aquifers and creating local storage solutions that will take pressure off the overstressed San Francisco Bay-Delta Estuary.

In a state that is leading the way in the fight against climate change, we can and must do better on assessing climate change impacts to our water supply, to water storage and to the environment. The water commission must make bold changes to its proposed rules to ensure California continues to be an environmental pioneer.