

Rain may actually hurt state water bond

Bill McEwen, Fresno Bee, 4-26-10

From a foothill view above Pine Flat Dam, the spring rain is beautiful.

Fast-moving dark clouds appear. The heavens open. Water collects in fast-rising creeks and tumbles into the lake. Farmers rejoice.

But the salvation brought by this year's bountiful rain will soon give way to political reality. As cruel as it might sound, backers of the much-needed \$11 billion state water bond on the November ballot needed another bone-dry year to win over voters.

The experts say that a wet year, by itself, doesn't mark the end of a drought. They say that this could be a mere reprieve in a long drought, and the condition of California's complex water system can't be assessed simply by measuring rain or the Sierra snowpack over a single year.

Most voters, however, aren't water experts. They know that it has rained, and that means one less thing to worry about. Now, they are free to focus on finding work, paying off credit cards and opposing another run-up of state bond debt.

The water-bond proposal resulted from long and hard negotiations. To get it on the ballot, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and lawmakers had to promise something for everybody.

The farmers got money for dams. The environmentalists got Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta restoration. And folks on the sidelines received sweeteners such as bike trails and watershed education centers.

But that's a lot of fodder for opponents.

It either shouldn't include dams or doesn't have enough dams. Some people believe it will pave the way for a controversial peripheral canal generally opposed by Northern California interests. With its hefty price tag, other people -- particularly public employee unions -- say that taxpayers can't afford the bond.

A fourth year of drought, rationing and water rate hikes would've commanded public attention. Voters would've been more receptive to the reasons for passing the bond.

Without repairs to aging Delta levees, a major earthquake could cut off water for 25 million Californians for as long as two years. The entire state economy -- not just agriculture -- suffers because of reliance on a decaying water system built when California had half as many people as it has now. It's indisputable that the ecology of the delta is stressed and on the verge of collapse.

By the political calendar, November is a long way off. But early polling indicates that Californians don't like the bond. A February poll commissioned by bond opponents, including the Sierra Club, showed 33% support.

Schwarzenegger has vowed to rally support up and down the state for the bond. But, with the lame-duck governor's approval ratings stuck in the toilet, his endorsement may do more harm than good.

Yes, the rain has come. It has swollen rivers, filled reservoirs and helped farmers. And it has set the stage for short-sighted California voters to put off fixing a water system in desperate need of repair.