Getting the facts straight on water

Steve Poizner, Fresno Bee, 2-11-10

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California's San Joaquin Valley faces a humanitarian and economic crisis of historic proportions. Natural drought conditions, which began in our state three years ago, have been made dramatically worse by the recent addition of a man-made drought.

The restricted pumping of water under a draconian application of the Endangered Species Act has resulted in fallowed farmland, unsustainable reliance on groundwater and rampant joblessness in the Valley.

It's a crisis that none of us can ignore. Last July, I released a detailed water policy, including plans to confront both the short-term water crisis and California's long-term needs.

In my plan, I called for more flexible application of the Endangered Species Act and committed to doing everything I can as governor to get water to Valley farmers and ranchers.

The governor should have the right to respond to drought emergencies within the state's borders, and I'll explore every legal option to do so. That includes asserting the sovereign rights of our state under the Tenth Amendment, all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court if needed.

I support the "Two Gates" project and other short-term infrastructure projects to quickly get water flowing back to the Central Valley.

On the other hand, my opponent, Meg Whitman, has a track record of using her wealth to oppose Central Valley farmers and ranchers.

In recent years, she gave $300,000 to the Environmental Defense Fund, a powerful special interest. This organization has sided against Central Valley farmers in court and denies that Congress is partially to blame for the current water crisis.

In light of these donations, it's no wonder that many are questioning whether Whitman's water talk is credible. How can she be serious about water when she gave material support to an organization that denies the existence of the man-made drought?

Her scramble to tout the water bond seems like an attempt to run from her history with the Environmental Defense Fund. In her rush, she seems oblivious to the fiscal consequences of the bond.

A responsible solution to the water crisis must also be mindful of the other challenges that California faces. Our state budget is in tatters. Over-reliance on state borrowing is partly to blame.

Debt service payments are one of our fastest growing categories of spending and will soon eat up more than 10% of the General Fund budget if we don't change course. The days of selling state bonds without forethought must end.

That's why so many of us who follow state spending closely have expressed deep reservations about the amount of unnecessary spending in the water bond.

I've called for a temporary debt freeze as a way to help repair the state budget. My freeze would not prevent voters from authorizing the bond, but would delay sale of bonds until the budget is fixed.

Once the state is on firmer fiscal footing, we should make the strategic infrastructure investments necessary to ensure a reliable water supply for the future, including surface and underground storage, improved conveyance, and Delta restoration. All of these solutions and more are discussed in my plan.

Meg Whitman seems confused about my positions, as well as her own. While she claims to be a friend to farmers and ranchers, she gave money to an organization that works against them. The Valley deserves to know where each of us really stands.

The best way for us to clarify our records and our policy positions would be a debate on the issues. I look forward to meeting Meg Whitman in a public debate in Fresno to discuss the water crisis and I am glad to accept the San Joaquin Valley Gubernatorial Forum's invitation to do so in April.

This debate will give Ms. Whitman a much-needed opportunity to provide some detailed specifics on her policy positions and clarify her history of donations to the Environmental Defense Fund. Voters in the Central Valley deserve a debate, not the same "politics-as-usual" empty promises.