



Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger answers a question about the passage of a package of water measures, at a news conference in the Capitol in Sacramento, Calif., Wednesday.

(Rich Pedroncelli/AP)

California lawmakers pass sweeping water reforms

New water reforms passed by the California Legislature Wednesday include repairing infrastructure, providing more reliable resources to a growing state, and protecting the environment.

By Michael B. Farrell | Staff writer/ November 4, 2009 edition

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After years of legislative inaction in the face of California's water crisis, state lawmakers on Wednesday adopted sweeping reforms in hopes of overhauling the state's aging water infrastructure and repairing its fragile ecosystem.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger praised the package as a historic achievement that addresses one of California's most complex issues. But some environmental groups say the bills don't go far enough in tackling some of the state's most pressing water concerns.

However, even critics say the measures represent an unprecedented undertaking aimed at providing Californians with more reliable water sources and restoring the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

The package proposes:

- A water conservation bill that reduces water usage by 20 percent in urban areas by 2020.

- A politically appointed board to provide stewardship of the fragile delta, which provides two-thirds of the state with drinking water. It could eventually oversee the creation of a peripheral canal to move water around the delta.
- Groundwater usage monitoring for the first time in California, which many say is the necessary first step toward meaningful water management in the state.
- Modest increases in penalties for illegal water diversion.
- An \$11.1 billion bond measure that would fund the system overhaul, as well as pay for water recycling efforts, provide for drought relief, and begin to revitalize the collapsing delta.

“In the long run the hope is that California water supply will be more reliable and our fisheries population will be thriving. Right now our commercial salmon industry has been shut down for the past two years,” says Laura Harnish, California regional director for the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF).

“Finding a way to restore that ecosystem and having a thriving recreational and commercial fishing industry and an area of biodiversity right here in our backyard is a huge win for California,” says Ms. Harnish.

While EDF and other environmental groups have been pushing for water reform for years, Harnish says that several factors led to Wednesday’s agreement: The state’s three year drought, federal courts dictating water policy to protect endangered species, and the fact that California’s population continues climb.

Governor Schwarzenegger has also pressed the legislature to take action on water reforms.

Harnish and other environmentalists would have liked to have seen a package that included greater conservation efforts as well as greater penalties for illegal water diversion. “Of course we didn’t get everything we wanted, but we look at the package as a whole and say this is good for California,” she says.

Another idea environmentalists were hoping to see included was agricultural water-use fees. “It would have provided for the first time a fee on water use ... and that would have provided long-term funding,” says Peter Gleick, president of the Pacific Institute.

That idea was scrapped during the often tense negotiations over the bills.

The \$11.1 billion bond measure will undoubtedly be a hard sell to Californians. The question will be put to voters next November.

Barry Nelson, senior policy analyst with the Natural Resources Defense Council, says that the package represents “a signpost in a new direction” for California’s approach to water. And, he says, it may finally bring about a truce in the state’s water wars, which have long divided north and south and urban and rural.