

Lawmakers approve major water deal with dams, conservation and restoration

Samantha Young, Associated Press, 11-5-09

SACRAMENTO — California lawmakers today passed an \$11 billion overhaul of the state's antiquated water system in a bid to supply a soaring population while preserving a fragile environment.

After a long night of debate, the state Assembly voted in favor of the comprehensive package of water bills and a bond measure to fund them. The Senate also approved.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger was expected to sign the five-bill package.

The plan provides funding for new dams, groundwater cleanup, conservation and habitat restoration. It gives Schwarzenegger comprehensive tools to begin restoring the crucial Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta and create a stable water supply for cities in Southern California and farmers in the Central Valley.

"Water is the lifeblood of everything we do in California. Without clean, reliable water, we cannot build, we cannot farm, we cannot grow, and we cannot prosper," Schwarzenegger said.

Lawmakers have wrangled for years over how to upgrade the water system. The problems became more acute this year when farmers faced a third dry year with less snowfall and new pumping restrictions to protect a delta fish.

Democrats and Republicans spent months hashing out a strategy intended to change how water is used in California and how to better manage the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

The water plan includes creation of a seven-member governing council to oversee the delta that funnels fresh water from Northern to Southern California, where most of the state's population lives. The maze of earthen levees is susceptible to earthquakes that could halt pumping for months.

Federal courts and agencies have ordered reductions in pumping to protect the delta's collapsing ecosystem.

Legislators want to require California cities to use 20 percent less water by 2020, although large urban areas such as Los Angeles and San Francisco would not have to meet such a high threshold because per-capita water use is lower than other parts of the state.

At the center of the new water package is the bond that has grown over the past two days to more than \$11 billion. The Senate had passed a \$9.9 billion version earlier in the week but the Assembly added more money for water recycling and conservation programs.