

State must act quickly for water supply

State Senator Tom Harman, Newport Beach Daily Pilot, 10-7-09

In the classic movie “Chinatown,” Jack Nicholson, Faye Dunaway and a cast of other greats gave us a glimpse into the ugly California water wars of the 1930s.

Water shortages and disagreements over who should control this valuable resource are as much a part of California’s history as the gold rush of 1849.

Unlike other natural disasters, such as floods or earthquakes, a drought takes many years to build, and the impact worsens as the drought drags on year after year.

The severe water crisis California faces today has taken three years to build, but in reality much of the crisis has been caused by years of inaction by the Legislature. Doing “something” — even if it doesn’t fix our water problems — is going to outweigh actually doing anything of consequence. Months of bipartisan effort and debate on this issue will be ignored if the Legislature adopts a half-baked last-minute solution without really addressing the issue in a thorough and comprehensive manner.

Throughout this crisis, Republicans and the governor have steadfastly maintained that we need to do two things: build new storage reservoirs and provide a new means of conveying water from north to south.

Without improved storage, we will not be able to meet the growing needs of California or ensure that the rich agricultural areas in the Central Valley receive enough water to grow vital crops.

A solution without improvements in water storage is really no solution at all.

But that is exactly what Californians are being offered by the liberal majority in the Legislature.

What the majority party is proposing ignores the need for water storage and water conveyance.

It does nothing to solve California’s critical water shortage problems. Not one drop of new water will be provided to the parched areas of the state under the plan that is being proposed. Instead of proposing a plan to build much needed water infrastructure, those in the majority are quarreling over how the Delta ecosystem should be managed. The only thing to come out of recent legislative hearings is a proposal to create yet another level of unnecessary bureaucracy with a group of unelected officials that would have veto power over water decisions in California.

For residents, businesses and farms up and down the state, delays in making the tough decisions needed to solve our water problems will only extend water shortages while millions of acre feet of water continue to be dumped in the ocean to ensure the “health” of the Delta ecosystem and to protect a 4-inch fish called the delta smelt. Meanwhile, our water system is exposed to the ongoing threat of catastrophic failure caused by an earthquake in the Delta area. The question one needs to ask is this: “What’s more important, fish or people?”

This year agricultural losses in California due to lack of water are estimated to run in the billions of dollars. California’s top two industries, high-tech and agriculture, need a safe, clean and reliable water supply.