

The Fresno Bee



Temperance Flat Reservoir project far from key state funding despite Valley backing

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May 03, 2018 11:44 AM*

The California Water Commission on Thursday put in serious doubt the future of building a reservoir at Temperance Flat in east Fresno County.

Meeting in Sacramento, the commission appeared to be headed toward preventing the massive water storage project to move forward. Commission members spent three days reviewing the public benefit portion of all 11 water projects seeking funding. Consideration of Temperance Flat began Wednesday and continued into Thursday evening.



Logan Page looks over the edge of Big Table Mountain into the gorge containing the upper reaches of Millerton Lake near Temperance Flat.

MARK CROSSE Fresno Bee file

Commissioner Armando Quintero sympathized with the project organizers, but he said the project did not meet the technical requirements necessary.

Fellow commissioner Joe Del Bosque, a westside farmer, said Thursday that it would be "tragic to see this project die tonight."

Supporters of Temperance Flat were asking for \$1 billion from the \$2.7 billion in state Proposition 1 funds.

But the commission's staff had only recommended \$171.3 million, citing a low public benefit ratio score of 0.38. A score of 1.0 is considered the minimum for an application to advance.

The entire reservoir project is estimated to cost \$2.7 billion.

In the end, the commission upheld the staff recommendation of giving the \$171.3 million, nothing more.

Mario Santoyo, executive director of the San Joaquin Valley Water Infrastructure Authority, the group pushing Temperance Flat, was doubtful the project would survive.

"Yesterday's actions by the commission, even though they pushed part of the decision off until today, clearly reflected that they were not going to reverse staff recommendation," Santoyo said. "They started putting that nail in the coffin, they just hadn't hammered it in yet."

Santoyo said the project supporters will regroup and potentially seek federal funding along with private investment. But, he admits, any state decision not to offer much funding could make it difficult for the project to move forward.

The Temperance Flat Reservoir is considered a linchpin in the San Joaquin Valley's water future. If built, it would have the capacity to store 1.3 million acre feet of water. That is roughly three times more than Millerton Lake east of Friant and downstream from the Temperance location.

Among those supporting the reservoir were state and local elected officials, community members, and civic and business leaders. Also present were environmental groups, who oppose Temperance Flat, saying it would harm the ecosystem, including the chinook salmon run.

Assemblyman Jim Patterson, R-Fresno, who testified on behalf of the reservoir, was dismayed at the commission's decision.

"The commission majority made a huge mistake today," he said. "They ignored every self-evident value of the Temperance Flat reservoir. This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to save, store, move and use millions of acre-feet of water — water that is now wasted and recklessly flushed to the sea. Today's decision was a shameful betrayal of the clear intention of voters when they approved these funds for surface storage."

Supporters of the project will hold a news conference on Friday at 2:30 p.m. on the second floor of Fresno City Hall. Expected to speak at the news conference will be Fresno Mayor Lee Brand, Steve Worthley, Tulare County Supervisor and SJVWIA president, Buddy Mendes, Fresno County Supervisor and SJVWIA vice president and Santoyo.

During Wednesday's meeting, several commissioners said they thought the project deserved a higher score on public benefit ratio. Staff gave the project's proposals for improving the ecosystem and boosting recreation in the area, a zero score.

Del Bosque reminded his fellow commissioners that 67 percent of the voters approved Proposition 1 and it promised, among other things, surface and groundwater storage.

"Who are we accountable to?" Del Bosque said. "We are accountable to the public."

The commission also found that the Semitropic Water Storage District's proposed Tulare Lake Storage & Floodwater Protection Project was not eligible.

The Kings River Water Association praised the decision, saying the project would export floodwater from the Kings River basin for the benefit of private landholders outside the area.

"We commend the California Water Commission for recognizing that this proposal is a bad deal for taxpayers, and deserved to be rejected," said Frank Zonneveld, Chairman of the Kings River Water Association. "This vote is a victory for the Kings River Watershed and all those who depend upon the Kings River."

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