

Momentum builds for public investment in California water-storage projects

By John Cox jcox@bakersfield.com
Mar 9, 2019



Assemblyman Vince Fong., R-Bakersfield
TBC file photo

It won't arrive in time for this wet winter, but hopes are rising that Central Valley politicians will soon deliver on one of their top political goals in recent years: investment in California water storage.

Bills introduced last week by Bakersfield Republicans in Sacramento and Washington, D.C., would redirect money from the state's high-speed rail project toward a series of reservoir projects, as well as repairs to a canal serving Kern County farmers.

If ultimately signed into law, the legislation would build on recent water infrastructure successes at the state and federal levels, including a 2014 state bond measure that raised \$7.5 billion for eight water storage projects.

Past efforts by Central Valley politicians to redirect bullet-train money toward transportation projects have failed, and it's unclear whether there is sufficient political will — or legal precedent — to steer rail money toward water storage.

But the new legislation could benefit from timing. Recent precipitation has flooded parts of the state, and on Feb. 12, Gov. Gavin Newsom announced the state's high-speed rail project will be scaled back to run between Merced and Bakersfield, rather than between San Francisco and Los Angeles.

The proposals by U.S. Rep. Kevin McCarthy and state Assemblyman Vince Fong seize upon a common frustration among many valley Republicans that billions of state and federal dollars dedicated to high-speed rail would be better spent on capturing water from wet years for use in future dry years.

MONEY FOR PENDING PROJECTS

McCarthy's House Resolution 1600, dubbed the RAILWAY Act — Repurposing Assets to Increase Long-term Water Availability and Yield — proposes to reclaim \$3.5 billion that had been earmarked for California high-speed rail. It would shift that money toward projects outlined in 2016's bipartisan Water Infrastructure Improvements for the Nation Act.

The WIIN Act, which McCarthy co-sponsored, advanced but did not fully fund the Shasta Dam and Reservoir Enlargement Project, the Sites Reservoir Storage Project, the Upper San Joaquin River Basin Storage Project, the Los Vaqueros Reservoir Phase 2 Expansion Project and repairs to the Friant-Kern Canal.

Together, those projects would add an estimated 5 million acre-feet to California's water storage capacity. (One acre-foot is enough to cover an acre of land with 1 foot of water.)

REDIRECTING FEDERAL DOLLARS

Some of the money for HR 1600 would come from the Federal Railway Authority's efforts to take back \$929 million it had dedicated for the state rail project but which has not been spent. The rest, \$2.5 billion, is spent bullet-train money California might have to pay back to the federal government.

Infrastructure work proposed in both bills is seen as vital to the valley because it would improve access to clean drinking water and make more irrigation water available for agriculture in drought years.

"The RAILWAY Act builds on the success of the WIIN Act by continuing to increase California's drought resiliency and helping ensure our communities, families and farmers have access to life-sustaining water," McCarthy said in a news release Thursday.

The bill would ensure California receives money that had been set aside for high-speed rail, he said in a phone interview Friday, adding he is unaware of anyone in Washington, D.C., continuing to push for funding the bullet-train project.

"I don't see it as having much support," he said.

HALTING BOND SALES

Fong's Assembly Bill 435, besides redirecting any unspent money left from the \$9 billion in bond sale proceeds authorized by California's voter-approved 2008 rail initiative, would prohibit any additional bond sales to finance the train project.

"It's time we redirect the funds to critical water storage projects in the Central Valley, which will help everyone in the state," he said in a news release.

Fong did not return a request for further comment.

POLITICAL SUPPORT

Awareness seems to be growing in Sacramento and Washington that California could use more water storage.

Kiel Weaver, principal deputy assistant secretary for water and science at the U.S. Department of the Interior, told the audience at Thursday's Kern County Water Summit in Bakersfield that it can be tough convincing members of Congress from other states of California's water needs — until he tells them much of the nation's supply of nuts, fruit and vegetables come from the Golden State.

"Duh," he said. "Without a question we need more water storage."

"What it's going to require is everyone sitting down together to do this," he said, adding President Donald Trump appears committed to building water infrastructure.

AWARENESS IN CALIFORNIA

The need is more evident in Sacramento, said Assemblyman Rudy Salas, D-Bakersfield, but it wasn't always so. He said one reason awareness has increased is 2014's Sustainable Groundwater Management Act, which calls for authorities in overdrafted groundwater basins in Kern and elsewhere to bring their use of well water under control.

"I think with SGMA coming around the corner, I think every water district up and down the state ... (is) recognizing how dire the need is to have sustainable water infrastructure for our population," he said.

WATER STORAGE PROJECTS APPROVED FOR KERN

The California Water Commission has committed to funding two Kern County groundwater storage projects following voter approval of Proposition 1 in 2014. They are among eight storage projects being funded by the initiative's sale of bonds totaling \$7.5 billion.

The larger of the two is the \$86 million Kern Fan Groundwater Storage Project southwest of Rosedale Highway and Enos Lane. Proposed jointly by the Irvine Ranch Water District and the Rosedale-Rio Bravo Water Storage District, the project would store up to 100,000 acre-feet of water from the State Water Project.

The other is the Willow Springs Water Bank, planned for the Mojave Desert about 12 miles west of Rosamond. The project would leverage half a million acre-feet in existing underground aquifers for the benefit of the State Water Project. It was proposed by the Southern California Water Bank Authority.

The water commission has said it expects both projects to be operational as soon as next year.

CALIFORNIA WATER'S 'LEGENDARY' PRESIDENTIAL MEMO

Rep. Kevin McCarthy's smile was on the big screens inside Rabobank Arena during last week's 2019 Kern County Water Summit.

There was a picture of him taken Oct. 19 in Phoenix standing next to two other government officials while President Donald Trump, seated nearby, held out a paper bearing his signature.

The document in the president's hand has become a "legendary memo" for the future of California water infrastructure, said the keynote speaker at Thursday's event, Kiel

Weaver, principal deputy assistant secretary for water and science at the U.S. Department of the Interior.

Dubbed the Presidential Memorandum on Promoting the Reliable Supply and Delivery of Water in the West, the memo orders federal officials to expedite approval of Western water infrastructure projects, according to a summary provided by McCarthy's office.

Among the memo's California projects: the Shasta Dam and Reservoir Enlargement Project, the Sites Reservoir Storage Project, Temperance Flat Dam and repairs to the Friant-Kern Canal. The document also applies to water exports from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.

The memo orders federal regulators to minimize regulatory burdens and "foster more efficient decision-making," according to the summary. It tells the U.S. Interior and Commerce departments to "suspend, revise or rescind any regulations that obstruct or delay or impede these projects (from) advancing."

The document lays out deadlines, some coming in June, for federal officials to update biological opinions required for the projects' approval. It does not provide any money for construction.

The memo also calls for better regulatory water forecasting, though the summary provided does not say what improvements should be made. It says more accurate weather forecasts will help improve decisions to export water from the delta to Central and Southern California, according to the summary.

John Cox can be reached at 661-395-7404. Follow him on Twitter: @TheThirdGraf.

© Copyright 2020 The Bakersfield Californian

https://www.bakersfield.com/news/momentum-builds-for-public-investment-in-california-water-storage-projects/article_195ea028-41ca-11e9-ae20-1f8d5cf520f2.html