

The Mercury News

Proposed ballot measure to build more California dams, desalination projects likely to be withdrawn due to lack of money and signatures

Despite drought, supporters haven't built a big enough coalition for water measure



This aerial view of Shasta Dam near Redding, Calif., taken Oct. 20, 2021, shows a noticeably low water level. Despite December rains, Shasta Lake, California's largest reservoir, was just 35% full on Wednesday Jan. 26, 2022. (Photo: Andrew Innerarity/California Department of Water Resources)

By: Paul Rogers | progers@bayareanewsgroup.com | Bay Area News Group
January 27, 2022

Despite California's drought, a proposed statewide November ballot measure to speed up the construction of new dams and other large water projects — and provide billions of dollars to fund them — has fallen short in its fundraising goals and is likely to be withdrawn by early next week.

The initiative would require that 2% of California's general fund, or about \$4 billion, be set aside every year to expand water supplies. Those could include new dams and reservoirs, desalination plants, recycled water plants and other projects such as upgrading canals and pipes. The measure also would streamline permitting for those projects.

But the campaign has failed to gain momentum and is far short of the nearly 1 million signatures needed by the end of April to qualify for the ballot.

Organizers say to have any chance, they must raise \$10 million by Feb. 1 to hire paid signature gatherers and ramp up efforts. As of Wednesday, they had raised only \$165,000, nearly all of it from Central Valley farmers.

"We haven't been able to find big donors who have been willing to come in and make this happen," said Edward Ring, a spokesman for the campaign, known as More Water Now.

"If somebody called us in the next week and said 'I don't care how much this costs, get it on the ballot,' we could," he added. "But after Feb. 1, we can't. You have to draw the line somewhere."

The measure, known as the "Water Infrastructure Funding Act of 2022," needs 997,132 signatures of registered voters by April 29 to qualify for the November statewide ballot.

But Ring said volunteers have obtained "less than 100,000" with only about 90 days until the deadline.

Supporters of the measure, who include farmers, desalination advocates and several Southern California water agencies, say California has not built enough new reservoirs, desalination plants and other water projects in recent decades because there are too many delays, too many lawsuits and too much red tape.

But environmentalists mobilized fast to oppose the campaign.

They said that the measure would limit the power of state agencies like the Coastal Commission, shift funds from other state priorities, and violate a longstanding principle where local users of water help pay the costs of big projects in their areas rather than having the state's general fund pick up most or all of the tab.

“I’m pleased that it’s likely to die a quiet and unlamented death,” said Ron Stork, a senior policy advocate with Friends of the River, an environmental group in Sacramento. “It was pretty bold, and a significant commitment of taxpayer resources for projects that are ordinarily supposed to be paid for by the beneficiaries of the project.”

An analysis by the nonpartisan state Legislative Analyst’s Office found the measure would save local governments money, but that it also would cost the state general fund as much as \$100 billion to hit the measure’s requirement that 2% of the fund go to new water projects every year until 5 million acre feet of new water supply was established.

For reference, all of California’s farmers, cities and government agencies use about 40 million acre feet of water a year. Shasta Lake, the state’s largest reservoir, holds 4.5 million acre feet of water when full and is 35 miles long.

Ring said huge storms in December reduced the severity of the drought just as fundraising efforts were ramping up. Also, he said, COVID made it difficult for volunteers to collect signatures. He said if they shut down the campaign, as is likely, they will try for a 2024 measure.

Some longtime water experts said the campaign’s key stumbling block was its inability to build a coalition and raise money from large labor unions representing construction workers.

Influential groups need to be brought in early to help craft such measure, said Jerry Meral, former deputy director of the California Department of Water Resources.

“People want to see the text,” said Meral, who has placed nine measures about water, parks, wildlife and transportation on the statewide ballot. “They want to kibitz the text. It’s very hard to go out with a finished, filed initiative and try to fundraise on it.”

Meral said unions often talk privately with Democratic governors and align their interests. If Gov. Gavin Newsom opposed the measure, he said, it is unlikely that labor unions that need his support on other issues would cross him.

Asked Wednesday if Newsom has an opinion on the proposed measure, his spokeswoman, Erin Curtis, deferred.

“Nothing to add on this one at this time,” she said.


Andrew Meredith, president of the State Building and Construction Trades Council of California, one of the state’s largest construction unions, said his organization was following the campaign.

“We have been watching to see if it gathers the requisite momentum to justify a contribution from our membership,” he said. “We need to be diligent and ensure that our contributions translate to a net benefit for our members.”

In July, following two record-dry years, Newsom declared a drought emergency and asked Californians to voluntarily cut water use 15% from 2020 levels.

Newsom’s administration also is moving ahead with plans to distribute \$2.7 billion for new water storage projects from Proposition 1, a bond approved by voters in 2014. Seven projects have qualified to share that money, including expanding Los Vaqueros Reservoir in Contra Costa County, building a new reservoir near Pacheco Pass in Santa Clara County, building Sites Reservoir in Colusa County, and constructing four new groundwater banks.

They must obtain all their permits before the state will issue checks, a process critics say has taken too long.

	<p>Paul Rogers Natural resources and environment reporter Paul Rogers has covered a wide range of issues for The Mercury News since 1989, including water, oceans, energy, logging, parks, endangered species, toxics and climate change. He also has worked as managing editor of the Science team at KQED, the PBS and NPR station in San Francisco, and has taught science writing at UC Berkeley and UC Santa Cruz.</p> <p>progers@bayareanewsgroup.com Follow Paul Rogers @PaulRogersSJM</p>
---	---

Copyright © 2021 MediaNews Group, Inc

<https://www.mercurynews.com/2022/01/27/proposed-ballot-measure-to-build-more-california-dams-desalination-projects-likely-to-be-withdrawn-due-to-lack-of-money-and-signatures/>