

Water Grumbling

07:54 PM PST on Wednesday, March 5, 2008

Jump-starting work on creating a reliable state water system is worth the cost of a little legislative uproar. Gov. Schwarzenegger's decision to move ahead on water plans last week caught legislators off guard, but the governor's sense of urgency is justified. The state faces significant challenges in ensuring a sufficient water supply, and further partisan stalemate only delays progress.

The governor last week released a set of proposed actions for addressing the state's water needs, after an eruption from the state Senate. Democrats feared the governor was bypassing the Legislature to start work on a canal to move water around the troubled Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, a proposal with a history of bitter politics. A court ruling last year over an endangered fish slashed water exports from the delta, which supplies water to two-thirds of the state's population and irrigates 3 million acres of agriculture.

Schwarzenegger quelled the criticism by offering a more complete explanation of his plans, which turned out to be far more comprehensive than just a new version of the peripheral canal idea of the 1980s. Most of the proposals require legislative approval, anyway; the governor is merely trying to spur action on water policy after progress bogged down last year in a partisan dispute over new dams.

And while a canal around the delta might be politically touchy, the state clearly cannot continue using the delta as a conduit for the state's drinking water and keep the estuary from environmental collapse. The governor proposes studying the prospect of a canal as well as other approaches recommended in January by the blue ribbon task force on the delta.

Starting environmental studies of those ideas is not unilateral action, as Democrats feared, but a way to save time. The delta options are limited, and whatever solution the state settles on will likely be one of those the governor proposes to study.

The governor also wants the state to complete feasibility studies of the proposed dams, which will add fact to a debate now largely driven by knee-jerk politics. Knowing basic information about costs and benefits would shift the focus from partisan agendas to the merits or flaws of the projects. Either way, the state will need to store more water, as long-term climate changes bring more winter rain and decrease the mountain snowpack the state relies on for water storage.

Schwarzenegger also proposes a 20 percent per capita reduction in water use by 2020. Conservation is the simplest, most cost-effective way to stretch water supplies, and can free up more water than any other step the state can take.

The governor pushed out ahead of the Legislature, but the legislators responsible for last year's stalemate have little grounds to complain. Besides, prompt action on the state's water issues matters far more than who made the first move.