

# Lawmakers seek billions to expand, improve California's water supply

The issue has renewed urgency because of a three-year drought that has left key reservoirs at a third of their capacity.

By Patrick McGreevy

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Reporting from Sacramento -- With California's budget crisis resolved for the moment, state lawmakers Thursday turned their attention to another emergency: a three-year drought that has left key reservoirs at 35% of capacity.

Legislators stepped forward with plans to ask voters to borrow as much as \$15 billion for projects to expand and improve the state's water supply.

"This is the session to aggressively solve California's water challenges," Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg (D-Sacramento) said Thursday.

He added, however, that the state should spend some of the \$7 billion in bonds previously approved for water projects before going back to voters for money needed to complete the work.

The issue has renewed urgency after the California Department of Water Resources last week said it may be unable to provide more than 15% of the water sought by contractors such as the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, which supplies water districts throughout the Los Angeles area.

The Legislature has been trying to address water issues for several years, but debate has bogged down in a continuing disagreement over the extent to which the state should build new dams and reservoirs, which are favored by growers but strongly opposed by environmentalists.

There also is conflict over who should pay for construction -- all state taxpayers, or the individual growers and water districts that would benefit.

State Sen. Dave Cogdill (R-Modesto), the Senate Republicans' point person on water issues, on Thursday proposed a \$9.98-billion borrowing plan that includes new dams and reservoirs.

"Recent rainfall has been a blessing, but it's just a drop in the bucket when compared to the epic drought the state is currently facing," Cogdill said.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger lauded the plan.

"Despite the recent rainstorms, California would still need to see weeks of drenching rain to avoid an extreme drought situation this summer," Schwarzenegger said in a statement. "Our water crisis underscores the urgent need to update California's water infrastructure."

Sierra Club officials, concerned about the environmental effects of dam and reservoir construction, expressed doubts. "This looks like more of the same, more money for storage that is unneeded," said Jim Metropulos, a senior advocate with the group.

A competing proposal released Thursday by Senate Majority Leader Dean Florez (D-Shafter) would put \$15 billion in borrowed funds toward water efficiency, recycling, conservation and storage projects.

Florez's proposal would expand the capacity of reservoirs in Fresno and Butte counties with new dams, and divert water from the Sacramento River through a so-called peripheral canal.

Voters rejected the same canal proposal in 1982.

The state's failure to adopt a comprehensive water plan has so angered some in the agricultural industry that they want to split the state, allowing large, mostly inland rural communities to band together and form their own government.

"Agriculture and our food supply is in jeopardy, we cannot allow 'agriculturally uneducated city dwellers' to dictate farm policies," says the website of Citizens for Saving California Farming Industries ([downsizeca.org](http://downsizeca.org)).

The group's leader is former Republican Assemblyman Bill Maze of Visalia.

Although recent rains have put precipitation in the state at 75% of normal for the year, state officials say major lakes and reservoirs are at only 35% to 45% of capacity.