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Water Bond in Drought-Ridden California Splits Environmentalists

By Arvin Temkar
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SAN FRANCISCO (CN) - Larry Collins has been fishing up and the down the coast of California for three decades. "I've watched this business go from a huge employer and just downsize, downsize and downsize," he says.

Part of that troubling trend is the fall of the state's salmon population, a lucrative part of the fishing industry.

There's a connection between that downturn and a broader crisis that's on minds across the state right now: Water.

It's the third year of one of the California's most severe droughts on record. Residents in some towns, such as East Porterville, no longer have tap water.

As wells run dry there and in other Central Valley towns, voters are being asked to consider a ballot measure that



would pour \$7.5 billion into water projects for storage, recycling and watershed protection.

Proposition 1, advocates say, signals new hope for water problems that have plagued the state for decades. But Collins, head of the San Francisco Crab Boat Owners Association, isn't persuaded.

Much of that funding, he says, will likely go toward dam building, which ruins salmon habitat and hurts the environment, while helping corporate farmers who need water for their crops.

Some environmental groups agree with him, and it's spawned a debate that pits industry against industry and environmentalist against environmentalist.

The measure, introduced in August, has widespread bipartisan support, including from Gov. Jerry Brown and California's Democratic and Republican parties.

Prop. 1 is a scaled-down version of similar measures pulled from the ballot in the past two elections. The largest chunk of money is \$2.7 billion for water storage projects, such as dams and reservoirs.

Though money hasn't specifically been designated for projects yet, both prospects are disturbing, says Chelsea Tu, a staff attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity.

That nonprofit, along with Collins' crab boat association, are part of the No on Prop. 1 campaign. "Overall, the bond de-prioritizes what California truly needs to invest in," Tu told Courthouse News.

Dams are expensive, do not provide much storage and damage the environment, Tu said. She added that reservoirs mine water from rivers that are already suffering from over-pumping and over-extraction.

The better solution is to focus on conservation, efficiency and water recycling, Tu says. Projects could include fixing leaky pipes and upgrading irrigation technology to be more water-efficient in rural communities.

While there is money in the bill allotted for such projects, Tu says it's a drop in the bucket compared to the funding that could be used for dams.

"Only \$810 million would go toward a combination of recycling, conservation and other strategies that really promote water supply reliability," she said. "It's unclear whether all that money would even be eligible for conservation. In any case, the total is a lot less than \$2.7 billion"

Fisherman Collins says Prop. 1, if approved, will end up pumping more water from the San Joaquin River to big company farmers in the Central Valley, who grow water-sucking crops such as almonds and pistachios. "To even contemplate doing more water development is asinine," Collins says.

Opponents of Prop. 1 point to funding by major farming associations as an example of whom the bond would actually serve.

"Proposition 1 burdens taxpayers with debt to build projects for billion-dollar farming conglomerates that make up groups like Western Growers and the California Cotton Alliance," according to the No on Prop. 1 website. "It includes the largest appropriation for new dams in California's history that will benefit these corporate farmers who refuse to fund the dam projects themselves."

Says Collins: "We're at the back of the bus here, because salmon don't have wallets."

But other environmental groups say Prop. 1's opponents are misguided.

Jay Ziegler, director of California policy for The Nature Conservancy, says the bond's portfolio of investments will put the state on track for more sustainable water management overall.

Ziegler doubts that the bulk of spending will go to dam building, because safeguards in the measure require stringent cost-benefit analysis.

Instead, he thinks that money will be used on improving existing water system. Examples include better use of existing infrastructure, better water management among agencies that share such responsibilities, and recharging groundwater.

"Overwhelmingly, the rest of the bond invests in diversification of water sources and regional water supplies," Ziegler said. Another myth, Ziegler says, is that the

bond would increase water exports from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. In fact, the expenditures will go toward water supply alternatives such as groundwater development, cleanup and other projects that would reduce demand from the delta, he says.

Spending proposals in the bond include:
\$1.5 billion for environmental protection and restoration programs
\$800 million for groundwater cleanup
\$725 million for water recycling
\$500 million for wastewater purification

Gov. Brown, who is running for re-election, has made Prop. 1 and Prop. 2, which would beef up California's rainy-day fund, the centerpieces of a recent ad campaign. Brown's message is: "Prop. 1 saves water to prepare us for droughts, Prop. 2 sets aside money to prepare us for economic storms. Vote yes on 1 and 2."

Whichever side is right, the fact remains that the drought has put a spotlight on water issues.

"The drought has certainly shown us that we are ill-prepared to address California's water needs," Ziegler said. "We need to have a much smarter integration of water management across the state in order to prepare for the next one."