

Governor beats the drum for Sites Reservoir

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SACRAMENTO -- The governor gave two thumbs up Tuesday to a proposal to build Sites Reservoir in Maxwell, an off-stream storage facility that has been on the back burner for half a dozen years.

Sites has emerged as the top candidate for new water storage funding from the governor's proposal of a \$5.9 billion bond sale for water supply.

In a press conference at the Department of Water Resources Joint Operations Center in Sacramento, the governor said the bond money is needed because the population is increasing rapidly and indications are that global warming will mean less snow pack water storage.

Increasingly the delta has been a state water management issue with sensitive species and a threat of salt water contamination from rising sea levels.

The Northern California Water Association has been pushing for Sites Reservoir for years, including the project and an integrated statewide management plan in an important agreement about Northern California water rights.

But at times other issues in the state have taken away from momentum that began in 2001.

NCWA Executive Director David Guy said there is "still a big hill to climb. But my sense is if anyone can climb this hill, it's the governor."

He said he is hoping that the state can bring people together to work toward the water package.

The majority of the bond money, \$4.5 billion, would go toward new water storage. Another \$1 billion would be for delta sustainability and \$450 million for conservation and restoration.

Sen. Sam Aanestad, R-Grass Valley, lauded the push by the governor for more water storage.

Aanestad's press secretary Bill Bird said his boss is "very on board" with the Sites project. The reservoir was part of the governor's water bond proposal last year, but was taken out of the proposal during legislative negotiations, Bird said.

The bond proposal also could go for a proposed reservoir at Temperance Flats, north of Fresno. The governor stumped his ideas in Fresno Monday.

However, Bird and others have said that Sites Reservoir is the farthest along as far as planning and environmental review.

"The senator is very much in favor of the governor's strategic action plan, but he is in the minority," in the legislature, Bird said.

The Senate majority leader, Don Perata (D-Oakland) is skeptical of surface water storage as an immediate priority.

His spokesperson Alicia Trost said Perata "has never said an absolute no," but rather that "we'll have a discussion about that."

She said the senator believes underground water banking would be more cost effective, quicker and not raise as much risk of litigation.

NCWA's Guy said the perspective of those who shy from surface water storage is skewed because people who live in the Bay Area don't understand the mechanics of Sacramento Valley water.

"It's not quite as simple as he would lead you to believe," Guy said. "The reality is we need both," surface water and groundwater storage.