

What comes next for California water bond?

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It appears certain that the \$11.1 billion water bond, the centerpiece of a historic water policy agreement championed by California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, will be removed from the November ballot.

Concerned that the bond measure would be rejected by angry, recession-battered voters, Schwarzenegger and the Legislature's water policy leaders agreed last week that it should be postponed at least until the 2012 election — much as an earlier high-speed rail bond issue was postponed until it could win passage.

It is, however, not quite that simple. The effect of postponement would be to take Schwarzenegger out of the equation since his stint as governor will end in six months. And the water deal's critics are already demanding that postponement should include a rewrite, which could mean prolonged wrangling or utter collapse.

As written now, the bond measure is a typical product of legislative deal-making, which means it forgoes logic and equity in favor of political expediency.

It's loaded with unconscionable pork — such as a quarter-billion dollars for Schwarzenegger's pal, billionaire Warren Buffett, to underwrite removal of dams on the Klamath River that have absolutely no connection to California's water supply.

Even more importantly, it would use general obligation bonds to finance water projects that should be financed with revenue bonds repaid by those who receive the benefits, not by a deficit-riddled state budget.

It is another test — not unlike the budget, in fact — of Capitol politicians' ability to deal with serious issues without resorting to trickery and payoffs. Would it be possible for Schwarzenegger or his successor, plus the Legislature, to write a water measure that addresses the state's very real water problems but also does so equitably and logically? The answer, unfortunately, may be no. One reason is that California's decades-long water debate is not really over water but over controlling land use, pitting development advocates against those who want to stop, slow or change development patterns.

That's why there's been a deep split among environmental groups over the current deal, between those truly interested in the water supply and the environmental health of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta and those who see land-use policy as the chief issue.

If a do-over on the bond issue is politically impossible, however, where does that leave the elements of the water deal that have already been enacted, such as a vast change in the governance structure of the Delta? Perhaps, as it were, up the creek without a paddle, unable to move without bond money to lubricate the process.

This may be another of those made-in-California political knots that cannot be untangled because the political structure demands a level of trust and accord that the issue itself, by its nature, renders impossible.

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