

Column Lester Snow is the answer man on the water bond



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Lester Snow heads the private California Water Foundation. (Ashley Jennings)

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Californians, you just voted yourselves a \$7-billion-plus water bond measure. What happens now? Lester Snow can draw you the map of water needs and detail the money being spent. He's navigated state waters for years in a multitude of jobs, among them head of the state's Department of Water Resources and other agencies. He's spent more time on water than Duke

Kahanamoku. Today he heads the private California Water Foundation, which supported the bond measure that California now has to spend wisely.

Is the bond measure a major step or an incremental one?

It's funny to say it, but it's both. Passing the bond is so significant, and for every bond dollar, you may get three or four other dollars invested. [But] I also refer to it as a down payment on what needs to be done in California. It gets us started, but it would be a mistake for anyone to think that now that we've passed this bond, our worries are gone.

Some bond projects may not be realized for 10 or 20 years.

Sometimes for the water to manifest from investments takes a while. We have a water system that hundreds of billions have been invested in over the years, and we have been slow to reinvest in it. With the \$7.5 billion, we're jump-starting some of that. We see how shortages can affect the economy and people's lifestyles, so we not only need this bond but to steadily reinvest in the system.

[With] the drought, there's been threatened litigation over transferring a few thousand acre-feet here or there. In the meantime, we discharge 1.5 million acre-feet of wastewater into the ocean instead of reclaiming it. There's money in the bond to reclaim more and more of that water. As the mayor of L.A. has pointed out, there's more room for conservation, and it takes money.

By and large, water is cheaper than most people's cable or cellphone bills. We like it when it's not expensive, but when it's not there, it causes many problems.

Are you concerned that voters who see no immediate result of the bond vote may be reluctant to support any more water infrastructure spending?

What voters expect and deserve is to see some things happen quickly and to see their elected officials talk about the long-term investments for the water supply. There are projects that can happen quickly and show people results: conservation projects, wastewater recycling, capturing urban storm water.

Is there a real correspondence between what the bond money will do and what California water profoundly needs? With thousands of water agencies, our problems are as much about structure as supply.

That's fragmentation. In the L.A. basin there's 88 cities but 400 water providers. [The] bond provides incentives for regional strategies to break down some of those barriers, but it's not the end-all and be-all. The governor earlier this year laid out a water action plan, which pointed out that there is no silver bullet. It can be characterized as an all-of-the-above approach with more attention to diversification of our supplies and our system.

With previous [water] bonds, Proposition 84 and 50, the only way you could get grant money is if you coordinated with your neighbors, instead of everybody doing their own little things with their own little jurisdictions. That started breaking down some barriers. This bond will provide additional funds for continued cooperation and collaboration.

The bond includes \$2.7 billion for ground storage, but it doesn't specify dams or underground storage, which is a ferocious source of partisan battles in Sacramento.

It's likely it will be both. The bond lays out that the funds will go for public benefits associated with storage and assigns the California Water Commission to develop rules and guidelines for storage projects. There's already some surface storage projects that have been under consideration for a long time: the Sites Reservoir in the Sacramento Valley; there's been talk about raising Lake Shasta; a proposal for an expanded reservoir on the upper San Joaquin River.

I think you'll see others coming forward with smaller projects to capture floodwater and recharge it into groundwater basins. I'm confident that while there may be some conflict, this is going to provide California with additional storage throughout the state.

Where might the most resistance to new bond projects come from?

Stuff that you might call conflict I think would simply be competition over funds, and that's actually a healthy thing. Because of the drought, there's more interest in getting projects done. We're going to see a great deal of creativity in implementing the bond.

How much of what the bond is funding will be about moving water around versus creating so-called new water, for example, by reclaiming polluted aquifers like the one in the San Fernando Valley?

The San Fernando groundwater basin has been contaminated and gone unused for some time. There's clearly funds in the bond to help clean it up. That [would] give L.A. more flexibility. Once they clean up that basin, they may be able to use it to store highly treated reclaimed water that's currently being discharged to the ocean. And should we ever have a wet year again, they'll be able to put water in that basin.

Some of these projects depend on matching funds, local, regional or federal. How do you think a GOP Congress might look on that?

We haven't had much in the way of federal investment for a long time. I don't think anybody has planned on federal money, so it really is state and local funds going into these projects.

Is there still hostility from the north toward the south on water issues?

Not like the old days. The conflict and discussion over fixing the delta, which is not part of the bond, can generate those attitudes. But especially because of drought and the impact of climate change, people see we're all lumped more together than they did maybe in the '80s.

California was the only Western state with no plan for managing groundwater. As of September there is statewide regulation of groundwater.

It was the tragedy of the commons, a race to the bottom. You as an individual could invest in this sophisticated storage system and your neighbor could pump out all the water you stored. Now there'll be a structure to keep track of who's pumping, how much, who's putting water in, and therefore [the state will] be able to better manage and incentivize groundwater recharge projects. Where there's a groundwater basin, [the plan] requires a groundwater agency to be set up and to develop a sustainable groundwater plan. [The agency has] the authority to require data to be submitted and to charge fees and allocate pumping if that's necessary. A failure on the part of the local entity can result in the state [water] board coming in.

You said \$3 or \$4 might be invested for every dollar of bond money. Whose money, and for what purpose?

In previous bonds we've seen the local agency proposing the project bring in 80 cents and the bond, 20 cents. Having state money incentivizes people to put out money for projects they've been thinking about for a while.

Does the Legislature have any role in how the bond money is spent?

We've seen with previous bonds that the legislative committees will want to hear from appropriate agencies how they plan to implement the bond, and given the drought, I think the Legislature will want to see timelines: How soon can you get this money out; how quickly can it result in benefits? It was a bipartisan bond. That's not to say there won't be arguments, but I do not see this becoming a political morass. People want to see something get done.

If you were designing a water system from scratch, it would not look like California's.

You have a water system that's evolved over 150 years. If we knew then what we know now, we might have done things differently. But this is reality, so you try to make the best decisions. That's why this bond being so diverse and funding a wide array of water activities is so important. There's no one-size-fits-all.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

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