

Calif. wrestles with need for more dams

By Matt Weiser and Jeremy B. White, Sacramento Bee

As California struggles through a third year of drought, elected officials from both parties are proposing to spend billions of dollars in public money on new dams and reservoirs. Seven different bills are pending in the Legislature that would use varying amounts of state bond funding to launch a new era of dam construction with the aim of increasing the state's capacity to store precious mountain snowmelt.

The surge of proposals has stoked familiar arguments in California's historic battles over limited water supplies: Water users in many cities and throughout the state's arid central farm belt say new reservoirs are vital to capture snowmelt that would otherwise flow "wasted" to the sea. Environmental groups counter that habitat and wildlife need that water, and call for more sweeping conservation measures and water recycling instead.

But this year, as California faces long-term supply shortages, some water policy experts are raising deeper questions: Is there enough water left in California to justify the cost of dams? If taxpayers do front some money, what are they really buying? Are they propping up a project with shaky economics, or buying something with real public value?

The bills before the Legislature aim to place a bond measure on the November ballot.

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