

How to spend water bond could be contentious

By Scott Smith, AP

LOS ANGELES – Passing a \$7.5 billion water bond may turn out to be the easy part. Agreeing on how to spend all the money could be much harder.

California voters overwhelmingly approved Proposition 1, which aims to expand the state's water storage capacity to better weather droughts like the one that has gripped the state for three years. Much of the money already is earmarked for specific uses.

But \$2.7 billion is not and so the debate to decide what to do with it now starts in earnest. One option is to spend it all on two new reservoirs. Other possibilities include desalination plants and underground storage facilities.

“Now that we have the money, the challenge begins of expeditious and effective implementation of the bond,” said Lester Snow, executive director of the California Water Foundation, an advocacy group that pushes for sustainability for communities, farms and the environment.

Jay Ziegler, the Nature Conservancy's director of external affairs, said he expects a variety of new ideas to emerge during discussions among state officials and a variety of special interests, including environmentalists and farmers.

“We're hoping to have a genuine dialogue,” he said. “We don't really know today what the right project mix is and how to optimize the system.”

The spending plan is intended to make more water available and to stabilize California's water supply, even during drought

periods Gov. Jerry Brown, who campaigned hard for the ballot initiative, said the margin of passage underscores that Californians want something done.

“Water is fundamental to life itself, to our economy, to our wellbeing,” he said Wednesday. “Proposition 1 is about investing in vital resources that make California the state it is.”

Some \$725 million of Proposition 1 will be spent on water recycling and treatment projects, and \$900 million will go toward cleaning up contaminated groundwater. Residents in poor California communities where wells have gone dry may be among the first to see some relief. Communities would have to apply for grants and be responsible for paying for a portion of the projects.

Central Valley farmers favor building the Sites Reservoir in Colusa County north of Sacramento and the Temperance Flat reservoir northeast of Fresno.

Mark Borba, 64, who tends 9,000 acres of almonds, tomatoes, melons and cotton in the Fresno County community of Huron, said he doesn't expect to see any benefits of the ballot measure in his lifetime but nonetheless was glad it passed. Farmers like him rely on water pumped south from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

Borba said he is confident that contentious issues such as levee repairs and salmon restoration in the delta can be addressed with the bond money, enabling farmers to get the water they need for crops.

“Unless we can pump water, we're dry,” Borba said. “All of those issues internal to the delta have to be addressed. There's lots of money in that bond to help do that.”

The California Water Commission, a nine-member board appointed by Brown, ultimately will decide how the money is spent. It

plans to take comments from the public as it weighs options.

Richard Stapler, a spokesman for the California Natural Resources Agency, said it could take 18 months to two years to determine which water storage projects will be funded.