

Calif. lawmakers want special session to tackle drought

By Juliet Williams, AP

SACRAMENTO – A bipartisan group of 47 state Assembly members delivered a letter to Gov. Jerry Brown on Friday asking him to declare a special session to tackle problems related to California's ongoing drought.

In the letter provided to The Associated Press, they say a special session is needed to address the unprecedented water crisis, which could worsen as California faces the prospect of an El Nino weather pattern that could bring severe flooding.

“We have seen from widespread reports that as much as half of the \$687 million set aside to help drought-stricken communities remains unspent in state accounts – and will remain there until 2016,” says the letter. “In addition, we are seeing the same slow and lethargic project pace with the funds raised as a result of last year's Proposition 1 ballot measure.”

The AP reported in June that more than \$320 million that was supposed to be rushed to drought-stricken California communities was sitting unspent in government bank accounts, more than a year after lawmakers voted to use the money to provide water, protect wells from contamination and upgrade outdated water systems.

A special session addressing the drought should also include “thoughtful and careful review of environmental policies that – even if well-meaning – may be doing more harm than good,” the letter says.

Assemblyman Devon Mathis, a Republican who represents some of the hardest hit areas of the state, spearheaded the effort.

“It just makes me sad. This is one of the worst public health epidemics that we have, this is up and down the state, and we have to do something about it,” he said in an interview before taking the letter into the governor’s office. “We talk about all these problems about water and we don’t really have a solid plan.”

He said while lawmakers have been talking about the drought for much of the regular session scheduled to wrap up late Friday, little has been accomplished.

A spokesman for Brown, Gareth Lacy, said the administration has taken hundreds of coordinated actions to address the drought, and a sound process is in place to ensure assistance is distributed properly.

“To date, hundreds of millions have been committed to emergency drought relief, disaster assistance, water conservation and infrastructure projects across California – with much more on the way,” Lacy said in an email. “This investment and response is the product of Republicans and Democrats setting aside politics and working together, without any need for a special session.”

He cited new rebate programs to replace old appliances and tear out water-guzzling lawns, and groundwater legislation to preserve vulnerable basins.

Democratic Assemblyman Luis Alejo, of Watsonville, said in a statement that the Legislature must ensure disadvantaged communities that rely on wells have access to safe drinking water.

“Additionally, as forecasters predict strong El Nino storms to hit California this winter, we must ensure our communities have flood controls in place and healthy rivers that can act as safeguards to the storms,” he said.

Republican Sen. Andy Vidak, of Hanford, also added to the call

for a special session.

Brown called special sessions this year to address a \$59 billion transportation infrastructure backlog over the next decade and figure out a new funding mechanism for Medi-Cal, the state's health insurance program for the poor, but lawmakers were set to wrap up Friday without proposals to address either.