

ACWA Supports Budget Agreement, Benefits To Water Infrastructure

ACWA News, 07/10/23

Association of California Water Agencies (ACWA) Executive Director Dave Eggerton released the following statement today regarding the 2023-'24 state budget that will provide much-needed funding for important water-related categories and associated budget trailer bills that will help streamline the development of critical water infrastructure projects.

“ACWA applauds Governor Newsom and the Legislature’s leadership in successfully enacting budget trailer bills that include reforms to help streamline the approval processes for building critical water infrastructure projects at the pace and scale needed to respond to the growing impacts of climate change.

“ACWA also applauds the Governor and Legislature for approving a budget that maintains funding for projects that improve environmental conditions in the Sacramento-San Joaquin watershed, including habitat restoration projects, multi-benefit projects that promote native species improvements, and projects that enable water users to make additional flows available for environmental purposes.

“Given the extreme climate swings within the past year, it’s abundantly clear that we need every tool in the toolbox in answering this challenge on behalf of all Californians. This budget provides public water agencies across the state resources to help address the effects of climate change in their communities.

“ACWA encourages the Legislature and Administration to consider additional state funding assistance for water infrastructure for climate resilience in the context of a general obligation bond on the ballot in 2024.”

Media representatives looking for more information about the importance of California water infrastructure projects and a library of some current water projects in the planning or construction phase can visit www.QuenchCA.com.

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Tribal Leaders, Environmental Groups Rally For A Better Water Rights System

Capital Public Radio, 07/06/23

Indigenous leaders and environmental groups gathered at California's Capitol on Wednesday to rally for better access to clean water. Advocates specifically expressed support for a trio of bills that would revamp the state's approach to water rights given before 1914, often referred to as senior water rights. Claimants of these rights are given priority to divert water over more junior water rights holders.

The three bills — Assembly Bill 1337, Assembly Bill 460 and Senate Bill 389 — would allow the state to review water rights claimed before 1914. The bills, sponsored by Democratic legislators, would also give state officials more power to curtail water diversions and to penalize illegal diversions.

“That's really I think what these three bills altogether are trying to do — create a California where it's not just certain folks who have had this power for so long, who are getting all the water and who can illegally divert water with almost no penalty,” said Julia Dowell, a community advocate with the environmental nonprofit San Francisco Baykeeper.

Jon Rosenfield, science director for San Francisco Baykeeper, described the current water rights system as one that favors more senior rights holders unfairly. He said claimants with pre-1914 rights are currently not well regulated.

“If you can't enforce all water rights in order of priority, you really don't have a water rights system,” Rosenfield said. “You have a free-for-all where older, entitled water rights holders are privileged to take as much water as they want.”

He said these bills are a first step toward a more transparent and functional water rights system. But the system itself is one that Rosenfield and other critics say is fundamentally inequitable.

Brandon Dawson, director of Sierra Club California, said California's current water rights system leaves tribes and communities of color at a disadvantage.

“When you think about who colonized California, who had the ability and the opportunity and the privilege to go to the government and say we were here first and we actually have the water rights systems, then you can get at exactly how inequitable that system is that they've taken advantage of,” he said.

Dawson said in the future, he'd like to see those senior water rights reallocated more equitably.

In recent years, the California State Water Resources Control Board has taken steps to address systemic inequities for Indigenous communities. In 2017, tribes worked with the water board to establish “tribal beneficial uses” of water so that they could be included in future planning. This offers protections for the cultural activities many Indigenous communities in California have that include access to water.

“Most tribes in California that are along rivers or streams have spiritual and religious ceremonies and processes that revolve around water,” said Gary Mulcahy, government liaison for the Winnemem Wintu Tribe.

Mulcahy and other advocates present at the rally expressed a desire to see these uses protected in water plans moving forward, including updates to the San Francisco Bay/Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta Estuary plan.