

Opinion: 'Pork' label unfair to Sierra Nevada water project

By Bob Kirkwood and Jim Branham

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As we head into the heat of summer, the politics of water will once again warm up as well.

Last year a water bond was passed by the Legislature and signed by the governor, placing it on this November's ballot. However, due to current economic factors, the governor has proposed removing it from the ballot, indicating this is not the time for a vote on such a measure. The Legislature is considering the governor's call, ultimately deciding the fate of the current bond proposal.

Some, including the Mercury News editorial writers, have suggested that the measure is full of pork-barrel spending. Apparently they believe huge sums of money are going to areas that have nothing to do with providing clean water for our homes, farms and environment. The Sierra Nevada region does not fit that picture.

We all have our definition of "pork," but to suggest that the Sierra Nevada Conservancy's share (less than 1 percent) of the bond is wasteful, inappropriate spending misses the mark.

There is an unfortunate lack of understanding on the part of most Californians as to where the water we drink — our lifeblood — originates. Throughout the decades of debate about the role of the delta to carry water to thirsty Southern California, San Jose and San Joaquin agriculture, any discussion of investing in the Sierra — the very source of our water — has been noticeably absent.

The Sierra Nevada Conservancy, a state agency created in 2004, accepts the challenge to help educate the state on this matter. Let's start with this important fact: Roughly 65 percent of our "developed" water comes from the Sierra Nevada region, the area covered by the conservancy. A recent publication by the Santa Clara Valley Water District points out that, "Half of Santa Clara County's water comes from hundreds of miles away, first as

snow or rain in the Sierra Nevada range of northern and eastern California
"..."

The bulk of the water for San Francisco and the East Bay also originates in the Sierra Nevada. Dedicating less than 1 percent of the water bond to the area that is the origin of 65 percent of the state's water sounds like only a trickle of the funding needed to us.

The area the conservancy serves encompasses one-quarter of the state and contains countless rivers, lakes and streams that carry the water to downhill destinations before it is used by all of us. If we don't pay attention to these watersheds, we will have less water for our cities and farms, and it will be more polluted.

Activities such as watershed and meadow restoration projects, protecting natural resources and reducing the risk and consequences of catastrophic fires all help to ensure the ongoing supply of clean water for our state.

And they are cheap by comparison to the infrastructure work being considered downstream. Without investment in the watershed itself, degraded conditions result in sedimentation of streams and lakes, decreased water quality, decreased clean hydro power and reduced natural storage of water.

Places like New York City long ago recognized the value of proactive watershed management and have invested the dollars needed upstream to protect the watershed. Those are precisely the kind of projects that the Sierra Nevada Conservancy has funded and will fund with monies from bond measures.

Ignoring California's primary watershed in a multibillion-dollar water bond would be bad policy, whenever that issue comes before voters. Let's hope that as these discussions go forward, more Californians will understand where their water comes from and why we need to take care of our lifeblood.

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