

NEWS > ENVIRONMENT

California drought: Ballot measure would fast-track water projects



Pictures taken in January 2019, left, and September 2021 show the impact of the California drought on the San Luis Reservoir in Merced County. (Nhat V. Meyer/Bay Area News Group)

By **PAUL ROGERS** | progers@bayareanewsgroup.com | Bay Area News Group

PUBLISHED: November 17, 2021 at 12:32 p.m. | UPDATED: November 17, 2021 at 5:58 p.m.

California has not built enough new reservoirs, desalination plants and other water projects because there are too many delays, too many lawsuits and too much red tape.

That's the message from a growing coalition of Central Valley farmers and Southern California desalination supporters who have begun collecting signatures for a statewide ballot measure that would fast-track big water projects and provide billions of dollars to fund them — potentially setting up a major political showdown with environmentalists next year shaped by the state's ongoing drought.



If approved by a majority of voters, it would require that 2% of California's general fund — about \$4 billion a year — be set aside for projects to expand water supplies. Those could include new dams and reservoirs, desalination plants, recycled water plants, and other projects like upgrading canals and pipes.

The money would continue flowing each year until 5 million acre-feet of new water supply was created, an increase of about 13% in the roughly 39 million acre-feet used in an average year by all the state's residents, farmers and businesses. That could take several decades and cost \$100 billion, according to [an analysis](#) by the non-partisan state Legislative Analyst's Office.

"We think conservation has an important role to play," said Edward Ring, a spokesman for the campaign, known as More Water Now. "But you can't get there any more just with conservation. If you want to be resilient against a prolonged drought, you have to have new supplies."

Supporters say California hasn't kept pace expanding its water supplies, leading to severe shortages for farmers in recent years and likely water rationing next year for many urban residents if the state's two-year drought continues.

With climate change, they note, scientists say California's droughts are becoming more severe. The state needs more reservoirs to save water in wet years, they say, particularly as hotter temperatures melt the Sierra Nevada snowpack.

"When we have big storm events, there is surplus water and we need to harvest it," Ring said.

The measure has already been endorsed by [27 state lawmakers](#), including 18 Republicans, one independent and eight Democrats. One is from the Bay Area: Assemblyman Tim Grayson, D-Concord.

Environmentalists say the measure goes too far, and are preparing to fight it.

"For next November's ballot, this is the No. 1 priority of environmental groups," said Jonas Minton, a water adviser to the Planning and Conservation League, a Sacramento nonprofit. "That's due to the destruction to California's environment that would result from the unsupervised spending of billions of dollars each year without environmental oversight."

Marin Municipal Water District board member Larry Bragman said the measure would "circumvent very important environmental protections" for the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, rivers and water resources in the state.

"It's not just fast-tracking it, it's really ramming it," Bragman said of the measure.

Marin Conservation League board member Larry Minikes said the measure appears largely geared toward Central Valley and large water users, but said it could potentially provide some funding opportunities for Marin.

"I would be cautious on this because this could be a quote-unquote agribusiness initiative and we'll have to look very closely at it one way or the other," Minikes said.

Under the measure, the money would be spent each year by the California Water Commission, a nine-member panel appointed by the governor.

The measure would streamline environmental reviews. For water projects on the coast, the California Coastal Commission would be required to make a decision within 90 days, and could be overruled by the state's secretary for natural resources.

Jack Ainsworth, executive director of the coastal commission, said the measure would "significantly weaken" the state's coastal protections.

"Drought in California is our new normal and the commission understands that responsibly designed desalination facilities will be an important part of California's water portfolio going forward," Ainsworth said. "We don't need to gut the Coastal Act in order to provide safe, reliable, affordable drinking water."

Environmental impact reports would still be required. But if opponents filed lawsuits, courts would be required to rule on them within 270 days.

Minton noted that many of the state's political power players could oppose the measure because money guaranteed for water projects means less for other spending in the state budget.

"This is the largest scam in California history to take over \$100 billion of taxpayer funds away from nurses, teachers and firefighters in order to pay for the sponsors' special interest projects," he said.

Political observers say the measure will have a challenge collecting enough signatures to qualify for the ballot. But if the drought continues and water restrictions are tightened statewide, as local and state water officials have predicted will occur, it could become a populist issue that might have a chance at passage.

"The drier it gets, the better the prospects for this measure," said Jack Pitney, a professor of political science at Claremont McKenna



Supporters have so far raised about \$100,000, mostly from Central Valley farm interests. The organizers include Wayne Western Jr., a board member of the California Farm Water Coalition; Geoffrey Vanden Heuvel, director of regulatory and economic affairs for the California Milk Producers Council; and several supporters of building a new desalination plant in Huntington Beach: Steve Sheldon, president of the Orange County Water District board of directors and Shawn Dewane, a member of the Mesa Water District board of directors in Costa Mesa.

California voters approved a major water bond, Proposition 1, in November 2014 during the last drought. That \$7.45 billion measure has funded projects from upgrades to drinking water plants to recycled water efforts. It also included \$2.7 billion for new storage projects.

But none has been built yet. In 2018, the California Water Commission approved spending \$2.5 billion on eight storage projects — four new dams and four underground storage projects — including [expanding](#) Los Vaqueros Reservoir in Contra Costa County and [building](#) a new reservoir in Santa Clara County near Pacheco Pass.

But before the projects can receive the money, they need to obtain all permits, finish environmental studies and identify other funds to pay more than 50% of their costs.

IJ reporter Will Houston contributed to this report.

The desalination plant in Carlsbad, Calif., produces 50 million gallons of drinking water for the San Diego area each day. (AP Photo/Lenny Ignelzi)

Tags: [Drought](#), [elections](#), [newsletter](#), [politics](#), [water](#)



Paul Rogers | Natural resources and environment reporter

Paul Rogers has covered a wide range of issues for The Mercury News since 1989, including water, oceans, energy, logging, parks, endangered species, toxics and climate change. He also works as managing editor of the Science team at KQED, the PBS and NPR station in San Francisco, and has taught science writing at UC Berkeley and UC Santa Cruz.

progers@bayareanewsgroup.com

[Follow Paul Rogers @PaulRogersSJMN](#)



SPONSORED CONTENT

Forget Expensive Solar Panels (Do This Instead)

By Saving Money Weekly



The Unexpected Reason Why Everyone Is Going Solar May Surprise You.

