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New Fight in California Water Wars: How to Update Old System

FRESNO, Calif. — In California's long-raging water wars, pitting north against south and farmer against city dweller, the one thing everybody agreed on Wednesday was that the outdated method of shipping water throughout the most populous state needs a serious upgrade.

A group of influential California farmers shook up the debate a day earlier, backing out of Gov. Jerry Brown's \$16 billion plan to build two massive water tunnels, re-engineering the delivery system. Westlands Water District in Fresno said it was too expensive and came with too few guarantees.

Brown's administration, however, gave no sign of giving up. Other key water districts serving vast farmland in the most productive agricultural state and millions of residents still have to weigh in, including the behemoth Metropolitan Water District of Southern California.

"I don't think a 'no' vote is the end of the story," said Metropolitan's general manager, Jeffrey Kightlinger. "We don't live in a world where we can just turn off the projects and walk away."

Kightlinger sees a path to launch the project before Brown leaves office next year. It's impossible to predict what form it will take before all the water districts have voted on whether they're in or out.

The proposed 35-mile-long (56-kilometer-long) tunnels, however, can't survive as it's drawn up now without "big players," such as Westlands, said Kightlinger, who entertains the possibility of a scaled-down project.

Current plans call for building twin tunnels east of San Francisco to deliver water from the Sacramento River mostly to farms and cities hundreds of miles away in central and Southern California.

Backers say the tunnels will stabilize flows, save endangered fish species and ensure a reliable water supply. However, critics say it will be used to drain Northern California dry and further harm native fish.

It is California's most ambitious water project in more than 50 years, when state and federal officials launched a hard-fought campaign to win support for building the current system of reservoirs, pumping stations and canals.

Westlands farmers on Tuesday became the first of several large water districts to vote, pulling out after having spent millions over more than a decade on drawing up plans and calculating costs.

The shake-up forced a big moment for the players to take stock of the whole water system, said Jay Lund, a leading state water expert at the University of California, Davis.

"It's a strategic opportunity to make a strategic political decision," he said.

Among the options are building a single tunnel to serve just municipal districts rather than two, in what Lund called the “garden hose” option, or burrowing one now with the option for a second one later, if it’s needed.

The Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta is such a vital water source for California that somebody will always be advancing projects, Lund said.

In Northern California, the source of much of the state’s water, Westlands’ vote won cheers from farmers who have fought the project for years.

They contend the tunnels, and their decadelong construction, would have further harmed the delta and San Francisco Bay, destroyed their farms and doomed many sleepy Gold Rush-era towns.

“Does this project end with that vote? I don’t know,” said Russell van Loben Sels, speaking by cellphone Wednesday from his vineyard where one of the giant water intakes for the tunnels would go. “There’ll be a lot of politics and a lot of arm-twisting and that kind of thing.”

Brown’s Natural Resources secretary, John Laird, said Wednesday that there’s broad agreement water deliveries will keep declining without upgraded infrastructure.

“While it’s too soon to speculate on potential changes to the project,” he said, “the state will continue to consider how best to meet the needs of the agencies” that want to participate.

U.S. Rep. John Garamendi, a Democrat from the delta, said it was a matter of time before central California farmers, such as those who are part of Westlands, realized that high cost and uncertainty would crush the project.

The Democratic governor had floated a similar plan during his first two terms as governor, aiming to build a canal around the delta to ship water south. Brown could not let go of it, said Garamendi, who seeks more water storage and fortifying levees.

“It just takes a long time for bad, old ideas to finally die,” Garamendi said. “Hopefully we can move onto cheaper, more effective solutions.”

Another major supporter that has yet to vote, Kern County Water Agency, called it a good project.

“I do think if we don’t go ahead (with the tunnels), California in 20 years will look back on this as a mistake,” general manager Curtis Creel said.

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