Calif. Gov. Pitches Water Tunnel Idea to Farmers

JULIET WILLIAMS,Associated Press

COLUSA, Calif. (AP) — Gov. Jerry Brown waded into potentially hostile territory Wednesday as he pitched his $14 billion plan to reshape California's water-delivery system by building massive tunnels below the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

He attended one of the largest agricultural shows on the West Coast, where he addressed hundreds of farmers, some of whom later said they remain wary of the latest proposal to address the state's water problems.

The Democratic governor acknowledged that many people in the region, about an hour's drive north of the state capital, have a different political philosophy than he does, noting that he has never won Colusa County in any of his statewide races. Yet he promised a crowd of about 500 at the Colusa Farm Show's annual breakfast that he would protect their water.

The stakes are partly personal for the governor, who retains an interest in 2,700 acres of ranch land in Colusa County settled by his great-grandfather.

"I said we're going to protect that land, and I promise you today that I'm going to protect the water on that land and the water in this county and everywhere else in this state," he told a crowd that generally gave him a warm welcome.

He vowed to return and speak more with community members as his water proposal is developed. But he also said the 100-year-old levees protecting the Sacramento River delta would not withstand a natural disaster, such as an earthquake or sea level increases.

"We need a secure, reliable supply. At the same time, we've got to have protections to protect your rights. So it's very challenging," he said.

Farmers in the delta region and upriver from where the tunnels will be located are concerned about their water supply if the governor's proposal succeeds.

Brown says the tunnels are needed to ensure that water deliveries continue to Southern California cities and Central Valley farmers into the future. Many farmers and Republican lawmakers want more water storage in Northern California.

"We're still worried. That tunnel he wants to put in, we're not too keen on it," said Kurt Boeger, a Republican rice farmer from Yuba City.

Boeger said he generally likes the governor and appreciates some of the things he has done for farmers.

"That canal and those tunnels, once they're there, the pressure's going to be on us

to send water there," he said, as others nodded.

Bruce Rolen, a rice and alfalfa farmer from Williams and a member of the Glenn-Colusa Irrigation District Board, said he wants to see Brown's plan incorporate some of the guarantees included in a water bond proposal approved by the Legislature in 2010 that was postponed because of the recession.

The proposal included water storage as well as "specific money earmarked for our protection," he said.

When asked later what he meant when he said he would protect the water rights of Northern California farmers, Brown told reporters that he would weigh all the options but did not intend to violate any of the historic water protections farmers have won, dating back to the 1800s.

"There are certain water rights that are historic and anything we do with this delta facility has to incorporate those water rights as an iron-clad legal, statutory and maybe even constitutional guarantee to ensure that they gain and not lose," Brown said.

After delivering his speech to a crowded gymnasium across from the county fairgrounds, Brown and his wife, Anne Gust Brown, spent about 45 minutes visiting with farmers as they toured the farm show, stopping by booths promoting everything from industrial dryers, irrigation systems, walnuts and insurance.

They were accompanied by an entourage of farmers in Wranglers and their Welsh corgi Sutter, who climbed into the cabin of a massive John Deere tractor with the first couple to pose for photos.

Among the booths Brown passed by was one displaying bumper stickers with an image of a handgun and the logo of President Barack Obama's campaign next to a hammer and sickle, denoting communism.

Yet he was warmly received by all the vendors and stopped to pose for photos with many. None could be heard challenging or disagreeing with him.

"We're in a bastion of Republicanism, yet they treat him with respect and as a neighbor," said Karen Spencer, chief executive of the farm show and the fairgrounds. She said the Brown family is well known in Colusa because of longstanding ties to the land. Brown noted several times that his grandmother is buried at the cemetery in nearby Williams.

"He can go to dinner here and nobody bothers him," Spencer said.

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