

Governor Plans \$687M for Calif. Drought

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California Gov. Jerry Brown, left, responds to a question concerning aid to drought-stricken communities after touring the California Emergency Services State Operations Center in Mather, Calif., Wednesday, Feb. 19, 2014. Brown, accompanied by Assembly Speaker John Perez, D-Los Angeles, right, toured the facility then announced a \$687 million plan to provide immediate help to those affected by the drought throughout California. (AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli)

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — Gov. Jerry Brown and the top Democratic lawmakers on Wednesday announced a \$687 million plan to provide immediate help to [drought-stricken communities throughout California](#) [1], including \$15 million for those with dangerously low drinking water supplies.

The proposal comes amid one of the driest periods in the history of the nation's most populous state, forcing farmers to fallow fields and some communities to warn of low water supplies.

"There's many ways we can better use the water we have," Brown said during a news conference at a state office near Sacramento. "You can't manufacture water."

The Democratic plan, which now goes to the Legislature, does not address long-term improvements to California's water supply and distribution system. Rather, it provides money for immediate aid.

Most of the money — \$549 million — will come in the form of accelerated spending from two bonds approved previously by voters. It will go toward local water conservation and recycling efforts, such as systems to capture stormwater and recharge groundwater supplies.

The general fund, the state's main checkbook, also will be tapped. In addition to the

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money for emergency water supplies, \$25.3 million from the general fund will provide food assistance in communities affected by the drought.

That would include areas of the Central Valley, among the nation's most productive farming regions, that are suffering from high unemployment as agriculture-related jobs disappear.

The proposal also directs the State Water Resources Control Board and the Department of Public Health to boost water supplies by allowing for the use of recycled water and stormwater. Increased penalties for illegally diverting water also are part of the proposal.

Peter Gleick, a water scientist and director of the nonpartisan Pacific Institute, said the proposals in the relief plan appear to be good ideas.

"But it depends what they spend the money on, and how carefully and quickly it's spent," Gleick said. "Whether it results in long term help remains to be seen."

Republican lawmakers, who were not included in the plan, said more must be done to address the state's long-term water needs. They and many farmers have been advocating for more reservoirs to store water.

"We need a real plan that increases storage for a growing state," Senate Minority Leader Bob Huff, R-Diamond Bar.

Assembly Republicans plan to propose legislation on Thursday addressing long-term water needs.

Asked about whether he believes California needs more water storage, Brown told reporters that for now he wants to focus on immediate needs.

"That's important, but of course storage takes a long time."

The state legislative proposal comes as Republicans and Democrats offer different solutions in Congress to deal with California's drought. The House approved a Republican-backed bill that would temporarily halt the restoration of a dried-up stretch of the San Joaquin River so more water could be diverted to farms.

California's two U.S. senators, Democrats Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer, have introduced legislation similar to the proposal announced Wednesday by the governor. That bill would put \$300 million toward emergency aid, drought-relief projects and water conservation.

"While Congress is locking their ideological horns over the best way to help, so far nothing to show for it in the process," said Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg, who joined the governor at the news conference along with Assembly Speaker John Perez.

Both expected the plan to pass the Legislature and be sent to the governor in a

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matter of weeks.

Most parts of California are under extreme drought conditions after three winters with below-normal rain and snowfall. As many as 17 communities are at risk of running out of drinking water in the months ahead, and farmers throughout the state have been fallowing fields and tearing up orchards.

The State Water Project, which supplies water to 25 million Californians and about 750,000 acres of farmland, will deliver no additional water later this year to its customers, the first time in its 54-year history that it has given a so-called zero allocation. That could change if precipitation picks up in the weeks ahead.

Beyond Wednesday's announcement, lawmakers still need to negotiate changes to an \$11.1 billion water bond that is on the November ballot, a measure that is supposed to provide the longer-term fixes sought by farmers and cities.

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Associated Press writer Jason Dearen contributed to this report.

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