

Water bond will fund conservancies

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SACRAMENTO — On the outskirts of Los Angeles, the Baldwin Hills Conservancy is a haven of hiking trails, sports fields and a lookout point with panoramic views of downtown to the east and the Pacific Ocean to the west.

The former oil-drilling patch of rolling hills sits along a flood-control channel, but it doesn't provide a drinking water source nor is it part of Southern California's water-delivery system.

Even so, the conservancy stands to gain \$10 million if voters approve the \$7.5 billion water measure that state lawmakers and Gov. Jerry Brown placed on the November ballot this month amid the state's historic drought.

It is one of 10 conservancies, state agencies charged with preserving and expanding open space from the coast to the desert, that would share nearly \$298 million under the proposal. The measure, known as Proposition 1, also funds new reservoirs, groundwater cleanup and technologies for water recycling and desalination.

In the Central Valley, the San Joaquin River Conservancy would receive \$10 million in bond money.

Prop. 1 replaces an \$11 billion water bond that passed in 2009 but never went to a statewide vote. Lawmakers tout the new plan as free of the special interest projects that undermined the old bond.

Yet, supporters of the revised water measure acknowledge that conservancy funding was key to winning votes from lawmakers who wanted to show they helped their districts, even if the projects have little to do with water.

"That was part of the whole balancing of the needs of the state and the different members (of the Legislature), so it is what it is," said Senate Minority Leader Bob Huff, R-Diamond Bar. "Certainly when you compare it to the 2009 bond, this is a lean, efficient, useful bond."

The spending on the regional conservancies in 2009 was among the biggest targets of the bond's critics. It specified money for interpretive centers, education programs, river parkways and other projects with no direct connection to the stated intent of the water bond.

The current version that will go before voters provides only general amounts of money that would be funneled to each of the conservancies, but it strips the language that specified how it should be spent.

"What you see with this streamlined bond is they learned the lesson from last time," said Chuck Devore, a former Republican assemblyman who criticized spending in the previous water bond and now works for a Texas think tank.

"This time, you have a modest serving of pork, and it's nicely disguised on the plate so it's not as visible."

The ballot measure language restricts conservancy spending to "multibenefit water quality, water supply, and watershed protection and restoration projects."

Lawmakers and interest groups involved in the water negotiations acknowledge that bicycle trails, interpretive centers and other such projects still could receive money under the measure, which officially is named the Water Quality, Supply and Infrastructure Improvement Act of 2014.

Baldwin Hills Conservancy director David McNeill said bond money could contribute to recycling programs that would provide irrigation water for park land and cemeteries, while also reducing pollution in Ballona Creek, which extends to Santa Monica Bay.

State Sen. Holly Mitchell, a Democrat who represents the area, says the conservancy often gets a "raw deal" because of its urban location but is a valuable amenity to the surrounding communities, many of which are low-income.

Environmentalists defend the money for conservancies contained in the ballot measure, saying protecting wildlife habitat and watersheds is a crucial part of a comprehensive state water plan even if it does not result in more water pouring out of the tap.

The conservancy funding is included in a part of the water measure that provides \$1.5 billion for protecting waterways and wildlife, the second largest slice of money behind the \$2.7 billion allotted for new reservoirs and other water storage projects.

"California has the most engineered water system in the world, but that's come at a pretty significant cost to the environment," said Jay Ziegler, director of external affairs at The Nature Conservancy. "It's an oversimplification to say we just need a bond that's just focused on water supply or storage."

Officials who run conservancies say their projects affect water more than appears on first blush.

The Coachella Valley Mountains Conservancy, which seeks to preserve the parched hills and sand dunes that stretch from Palm Springs to the Salton Sea, stands to gain \$10 million from the bond.

Executive director Jim Karpiak said while the rivers in the area almost always are dry, his conservancy plans to buy land to maintain a drainage system that fills aquifers during the occasional torrent of rain.

"Preserving the natural land is critical for that purpose," he said.

The San Diego River Conservancy, which would receive \$17 million under the ballot measure, hopes to complete gaps in 17 miles of now disconnected bicycling and pedestrian trails.

Executive officer Kevin McKernan said the parkway is more than just a trail. He said it also serves as a buffer against sediment running into the river, which is dry much of the year below the El Capitan dam and consists primarily of runoff from towns and cities east of downtown San

Diego.

Some Republican lawmakers have raised concerns about how closely taxpayer money flowing to the conservancies is being monitored.

A 2009 audit by the state Department of Finance questioned the San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles Rivers and Mountains Conservancy spending \$1.3 million intended for parks and conservation on administration. It also found that \$55,000 in bond money was spent on lobbying services.

The conservancy disputed the findings and said its spending was legitimate. It stands to receive \$30 million under the November ballot measure.

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