Water bond's lure for the North Coast

John Driscoll/The Times-Standard
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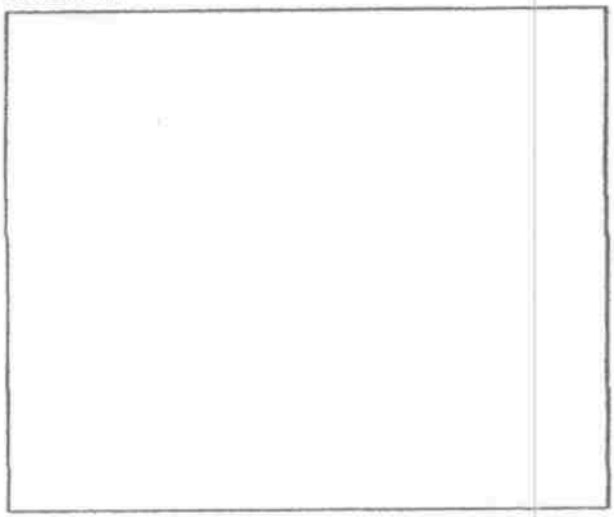
The North Coast would get $315 million and be eligible for a share of $3.38 billion as part of a state water bond being proposed for 2010 -- a bond that many are questioning as unaffordable and that regional interests say threaten salmon rivers.

The Department of Water Resources this week roughly outlined how the $11.1 billion in the water bond would be dispersed by region. The North Coast would be eligible for hundreds of millions for watershed projects, wetland restoration, salmon habitat improvement, waterfowl habitat projects, and vegetation management. In the bond measure is also $250 million for removal of the Klamath River's four main dams.

While the bond, and the legislative package passed earlier this month, has been touted by supporters as a big stride toward improving the state's weak water policies, conservationists in the north point out that most of the money would go to new dams, water projects and a canal to pump water around the Sacramento River Delta to cities and farms to the south. That could threaten water available for fish in the Trinity River, which is connected to the Central Valley Project, they say.

"I'm pretty sure that it's a long-term commitment of Central Valley water and nobody is sure how the Trinity River plays into that," said Humboldt County Supervisor Jimmy Smith, "but I think it's going to be significant."

The Legislative Analyst's Office points out that the state is currently operating at a $6.3 billion shortfall, with deficits projected to reach $14 billion next fiscal year and $20 billion a year for another five years. The bond would create debt service of $600 million a year.



Smith said the proposed bond is far too expensive and complex, and that the Klamath money should be carved off and put forward in its own package, or a simpler one.

If the money for the North Coast -- Humboldt, Del Norte, Trinity and parts of Glenn, Lake, Marin, Modoc, Siskiyou and Sonoma counties -- is meant to draw support from the region, it's not certain that it would be delivered. Proposition 84, a water bond passed in 2006, was $5.4 billion. Tom Stokely with the California Water Impact Network pointed out that some $40 million for the California Department of Fish and Game's fisheries restoration program hasn't yet come through.

Billions from previous water bonds also haven't been spent, according to the State Treasurer's Office.

Stokely cautioned that the efforts most likely to be funded are the building of dams, reservoirs and canals, while fish and wildlife provisions are likely to get bound up due to state budget woes.

"I liken it to Charlie Brown and Lucy where she holds the football for him and then at the last minute pulls it away," Stokely said.

Assemblyman Wesley Chesbro called the water package and the bond to be "a wolf in sheep's clothing." The Trinity River may be particularly vulnerable to excess diversion due to existing infrastructure tying it to the Central Valley Project, he said. Chesbro also said that water projects have always been paid with revenue bonds, but that's different with the latest water bond.

"This would be a general obligation bond, which means they want to take our water and then make us pay for it," the Arcata Democrat said.

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