

**Santa Cruz County won't see major benefits from state water package**  
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**By Kurtis Alexander**

County residents will be asked to support an \$11.1 billion state water bond on the ballot next year, though water and policy experts say there's little to gain for the region.

"What we have to give may outweigh what we get," said Ron Duncan, conservation manager for the Soquel Creek Water District. "I think people really need to investigate what the benefits are not just statewide but locally."

The proposed bond comes alongside a suite of new water laws signed by the governor last week and touted as a historic remedy to California's age-old water woes. The package seeks to shore up problems at the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, where two-thirds of the state's water passes, as well as establish new conservation targets and monitoring standards for cities.

Santa Cruz County, however, appears largely unaffected. None of the area's nearly dozen water districts get their water from the delta, and most already meet the conservation and monitoring requirements spelled out in the new laws -- or are very close to doing so.

"We're the poster child for this," said Bill Kocher, head of the Santa Cruz Water Department, which serves 95,000 people. "We're still going to lower our water use further, but it won't have to do with the new bill that passed."

The four bills in the water package, which etch out a new, more conservation-minded state policy, are on the books regardless of the proposed bond. The bond, which helps finance some of the policy

objectives as well as a host of other state water projects, needs approval from voters next November.

Of \$11.1 billion the bond would generate, Santa Cruz County would be eligible for a relatively small chunk, a portion of \$58 million slated for the area between Santa Barbara to Santa Cruz, an inequity that concerns some.

"On the Central Coast, there's almost nothing in the bond for us," said former Santa Cruz Assemblyman John Laird, who worked on water issues while in the Legislature and claims the water bond is simply too big for what the state can afford right now. "We would be having to react to its passage with lower class sizes, higher student fees and threatened closure of state parks to pay for the water projects of people in other parts of the state."

Sen. Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto, who authored one of the bills in the water package, agrees the bond is pricey, but say it's just part of a water solution that's praiseworthy.

"Taken as a whole, the package is a significant step forward for environmental protections and water supply," he said.

Simitian, whose district includes a portion of Santa Cruz County, acknowledged parts of California will benefit less than others but says everybody gains from a secure statewide water system. Santa Cruz commuters, for example, would benefit from improvements in Silicon Valley and local fisherman from salmon habitat projects in the northern part of the state.

"No county is an island and that's certainly true with respect to the state's water supply," he said.

The conservation targets included in the new water package seek 20 percent reductions at local water districts. However, districts that provide 100 gallons a day or less per capita -- considered low water use -- are exempt.

Districts in Santa Cruz County are still figuring out how exactly their supplies will be measured under the new rules, but most local water managers suspect they'll be under or near the threshold.

Santa Cruz is right at 100 gallons, the last time they were measured. Soquel Creek Water District is slightly less, and Scotts Valley Water District slightly more.

Charlie McNiesh, general manager of the Scotts Valley district, said at first glance the new regulations didn't seem like much of a burden.

"It's not inconsistent with where we're hoping to go," he said.

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