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February 2, 2015

California Water Commission
Room 1148
PO Box 942836
Sacramento, CA 94283-0001
Via email: cwc@water.ca.gov

RE: Water Quality, Supply, and Infrastructure Improvement Act of 2014 - Public Benefits of Water Storage

Dear Water Commission:

The California Water Alliance (“CalWA”) is a statewide not-for-profit organization dedicated to raising awareness about the nature of water and promoting long-term, sustainable solutions that meet the needs of families, cities, businesses, farmers, and the environment throughout California. As representatives of nearly three thousand water consumers, business users, agricultural water users, and consumers throughout California, we thank you for this opportunity to comment as you continue the deliberative process on the allocation of funds from Proposition 1 – the Water Quality, Supply, and Infrastructure Improvement Act of 2014.

We write to you as California enters its fourth year of extreme drought affecting 80 percent of the state. The news media are filled with reports of the incredible toll drought has taken on Californians from small rural communities and major metropolitan areas, and on hundreds of thousands of acres of productive farm land and miles of precious environmental landscapes. Additionally, news media are reporting the Commission is hearing from many special interest stakeholders seeking the diversion of Proposition 1 funds to other priorities and needs; specifically funds that have been dedicated by the legislature and approved by the voters of California to water storage projects. While some of these alternatives may have merit or serve good purposes, other chapters of the statute exist to address their needs.

The voters passed Proposition 1 by a margin of over 67% percent on the promise made by Governor Edmund G. Brown Jr. and the state legislature that the bond measure would provide new water supplies to resolve the state’s drinking water needs and protect from future droughts. Less evident, but equally important were demands for additional water supplies to restore idled agricultural food production and to remedy several environmental and public safety challenges, including those posed by earthquake and unsafe levees in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. The Commission should keep faith with the voting public by assuring that 100 per cent of water storage funding remains dedicated to water storage project needs.

CalWA impresses on the Commission that water storage—new reservoir storage and groundwater banking—is critical to the state recovering from California’s historic drought and avoiding the cyclical and certain problems of new drought periods in the future. As the state enters a fourth year of crippling drought; each rainfall that passes and snowmelt occurrence is a lost opportunity to recover or protect from future disaster.

Storage of water destined for urban use—including residential and necessary business use in both densely populated and rural areas of California—is critical for maintaining the health, safety, and security of California. The legislature has found that surface and groundwater quality are impacted by reduced deliveries during times of drought. Failing municipal and private wells, increased levels of harmful contaminants, lack of pure, clean water, and widespread land subsidence are but symptoms of California’s pressing need for new water-supply options.

The beneficial use of water supplies for food and fiber agriculture in California is critically important to the state’s population and that of the nation. As emphasized by President Barak Obama in 2014, fallowing fields in California is a security, health, safety, and social-equity issue for all Americans. Rising food costs here and across the U.S. limits access and affordability of safe, local, and healthy products across all economic strata.

The Commission may hear others claim that conservation and technology can serve these pressing needs equally well as would new storage and water banking provided in Proposition 1 project funding. They are wrong. The growth of California has far outstripped the abilities of conservation measures, reduced urban consumption, and new agricultural irrigation technologies. To provide more than a stopgap, new storage projects and water transfers from the north to south will allow for fresh water-flow management flexibility for environmental health, drought and flood protection, and will refill Central and Southern California’s groundwater aquifers.

CalWA urges the Commission to communicate through its regulatory order that the allocation of funding for water storage intended for agricultural use is a primary and beneficial use of these important state resources, in times of plenty as well as in times of drought.

The preliminary site evaluations and environmental impact reports are nearly complete on several storage projects that are virtually shovel ready when Proposition 1 funding permits their construction. In total, these projects could add half again the amount of water transferred annually from north to south during California’s dry season. Alas, Proposition 1 cannot fund all of them. Perhaps some of these worthy storage projects may be completed with matching Federal funds, but it is a certainty that all of the state bond funds allocated to storage and water banking can and should be used for those, not other, purposes.

CalWa urges the California Water Commission to hold tightly the purse strings of Chapter 8 of Proposition 1 and restrict the use of its funds exclusively to build new water storage and fund groundwater banking projects. It is a necessary and responsible answer to allow California to recover from the current drought, build a reserve for future dry years, and protect the health, safety and security of California’s and the United States’ citizens.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Aubrey J. D. Bettencourt". The signature is written in a cursive style with a light grey rectangular background behind it.

Aubrey J. D. Bettencourt
Executive Director
California Water Alliance