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Opinion

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Water bond: opportunity lost

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Voters will not get the chance this fall to fund desperately needed improvements in California's water system because their representatives in Sacramento, most notably Gov. Pete Wilson, let them down.

A deal was well within reach to simultaneously advance the agendas of environmentalists, farmers and city dwellers with a \$1.8 billion water bond. There could have been funding to build the world's largest screens to prevent water pumps in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta from killing endangered fish. And there could have been the first bond funding since the State Water Project Act of 1960 for new storage, up to 2 million acre feet of additional storage below ground in depleted aquifers.

Yet funding for these and many other worthy projects -- from improving flood protection and water treatment in Sacramento to protecting watersheds in the Sierra and coastal rivers -- will simply have to wait for a governor with the ability to make them happen. For these days in California, there is no water bond, either in the financial or political sense of the word.

The challenge facing Wilson was to find the compromise among water factions that was beyond the political reach of state Sen. Jim Costa of Fresno and Assemblyman Mike Machado of Linden, who valiantly tried to cobble together the bond. The primary sticking point was the new above-ground, off-stream reservoirs in Northern California.

Environmentalists stubbornly and wrongly resisted

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any monies to study the reservoirs. The production agriculture lobby (not, by and large, the agriculture water districts) were equally extreme in demanding subsidies for both reservoir studies and actual construction.

That left plenty of political ground for Wilson to identify and advocate a compromise. Instead, the governor sided squarely with the production agriculture lobby. His final and fatal maneuver was to elevate the reservoir debate into a macho test of strength against Senate President Pro Tem John Burton, who opposed reservoir monies in the bond.

Neither side budged. And the once-promising prospects for the bond evaporated in rhetoric over reservoirs about which nobody has the foggiest idea whether they are feasible, how much they actually would cost or who would ultimately pay for them.

The biggest loser, besides Wilson, were the farmers of the San Joaquin Valley.

They lost an opportunity not only for new underground water storage projects but for hundreds of millions of dollars in support for necessary Delta restoration projects that they may have to pay for if the public does not.

Also wounded was CalFed, an ongoing state-federal effort to build a consensus among these warring factions on how to restore the Delta and improve the stability and quality of water deliveries to cities and farmers.

CalFed was born from the political realization that it will take a coalition of all the interest groups to advance water policy California. Somehow that was forgotten last week in the Capitol. The sooner our leaders remember and behave accordingly, the better.



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