

Kern County agency votes to help fund delta water delivery system



The board of the Kern County Water Agency on Thursday took a critical vote on the \$17-billion California WaterFix project. (Katie Falkenberg / Los Angeles Times)



By **Bettina Boxall**

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In a small step forward for [California WaterFix](#), a major San Joaquin Valley irrigation district on Thursday tentatively endorsed a partial investment in the water-delivery project.

With virtually no discussion, the board of the Kern County Water Agency approved a letter to the state saying that the agency was interested in pursuing a 6.5% share in the \$17-billion project, which after a decade of planning is going through a crucial funding stage.

After the vote, Curtis Creel, Kern’s general manager, said that figure could go up or down, depending on further discussions with Kern’s member irrigation districts.

“We all recognize this is an iterative process,” Creel said.

“I think it’s pretty significant,” he said of the 6.5% share, which equals roughly \$1 billion in WaterFix funding. A full buy-in on Kern’s part would amount to slightly more than twice that amount.

Earlier this week, the project’s biggest potential customer, the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, [committed to paying](#) for roughly a quarter of the project.

WaterFix's survival depends on the willingness of the urban and agricultural districts that get water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta to pay for the project, which calls for construction of two massive tunnels under the delta and a new diversion point on the Sacramento River.

The financing scheme suffered a major setback last month when the [Westlands Water District](#), the state's largest irrigation district, said its growers could not afford the tunnels and voted not to participate in WaterFix.

Kern's move on Thursday pushes funding commitments to only about a third of the project's cost, making it clear that months of negotiations lie ahead with other potential customers of WaterFix, a top priority of Gov. [Jerry Brown](#)'s administration.

Brown last week personally lobbied members of the MWD and Kern boards to commit to financing. In the only board comments before Thursday's vote, Kern president Ted Page acknowledged the governor's commitment to moving the project forward.

"California desperately needs this water infrastructure," Page said. The vote was unanimous, with one member absent.

As part of the funding plan, the largely urban State Water Project agencies that receive delta supplies decided that they can buy or lease other districts' interest in WaterFix.

MWD assistant general manager Roger Patterson, who attended the 10-minute Kern meeting, said his agency has been talking to Kern and other State Water Project contractors about possible deals.

The MWD staff would have to return to its board for approval of any agreement to finance more than the 26% share the MWD agreed to this week.

Kern "essentially said we're in at this level," Patterson said, calling the board's action "a positive sign."

bettina.boxall@latimes.com

Twitter: [@boxall](#)

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