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## Water project could increase bills by 20 percent

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Local water bills could increase by 20 percent or more if the state builds a long-discussed canal in Northern California aimed at making Southern California's water supply more reliable.

"These are tough decisions, but I think it's very important for the public to compare what the alternatives are," said Doug Headrick, general manager of the San Bernardino Valley Municipal Water District.

The alternatives, said state Sen. Bob Huff, R-Walnut, are even more expensive.

Earlier this month, state lawmakers passed a set of bills that aim to address a bevy of California water issues, from water storage to groundwater cleanup to environmental protections. Language in one of those bills, leaders say, could ease the process of building a canal that would bypass the environmentally sensitive Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta - a weak link in California's water supply chain.

Huff said the delta is vulnerable because of environmental regulations and its aging, eroded levee system.

A new canal would allow water to flow to Southern California without further harming the levees and the Delta Smelt, a species of fish that has been harmed by pumps that move water through the delta. Because of the smelt and drought conditions, state water officials have had to cut back on the amount of water pumped to Southern California.

That's caused water agencies to find other water sources, which are usually more expensive, leading to higher water rates for consumers.

A canal bypassing the delta - referred to as the peripheral canal - had always been part of the plan for the State Water Project, but it was never constructed.

While there's nothing in the new water deal that specifically calls for construction of the canal, Huff said the bills provide protection against lawsuits that could hamper canal construction as well as funding for environmental work related to the construction. That makes the canal more possible than ever.

"I think the peripheral canal happens," Huff said. "I believe it's going to happen sooner rather than later."

The water package includes \$11 billion in bonds for water projects around the state, but that funding - which must be approved by voters next year - would not cover construction of a peripheral canal.

Instead, the canal, which Headrick said could

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cost between \$5 billion and \$8 billion, would be paid for by state water contractors and, ultimately, water users.

Water contractors - large agencies that get water from the state water project's series of reservoirs and canals - sell their water to local water agencies. The proceeds go to pay down the debt from building state water project facilities.

The peripheral canal, if built, would add new debt, which water contractors would have to pay off along with older debts, said Kirby Brill, general manager of the Mojave Water Agency.

Some water agencies rely mostly on water sales for their income, while others rely on water sales and property taxes, making it difficult to know how Inland Empire residents would be affected by the added cost of a peripheral canal.

But Headrick said the San Bernardino Valley Municipal Water District, which supplies imported water for the eastern San Bernardino Valley, might have to raise its rates by about 20 percent, and other districts might have to raise them higher.

The Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, which provides water to the West End of San Bernardino County, would have to increase its rates by about 15 percent over the next decade, agency spokesman Bob Muir said.

Huff and local water officials said the potential rate increase could be painful, but that water prices are likely to go up no matter what. In the

case of the peripheral canal, it at least means higher rates in exchange for a more reliable water supply for the foreseeable future, said Richard Atwater, general manager of the Chino-based Inland Empire Utility Agency.

"I don't think there's any better alternative than fixing (the State Water Project)," he said.

Huff said the next option could be building desalinization facilities - plants that turn sea water into fresh water - but that could be four times more expensive than building the canal.

Headrick said the canal would be expensive, but, like the interstate system and the existing State Water Project, a good investment.

"If you look back in history, projects that looked very, very expensive and on the edge of not being viable, today, they look like they were genius," Headrick said. "The State Water Project was very expensive when it was built. But we look at the deliveries from the water project today, and it looks very reasonable."

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