

Pajaro Valley water bill clears first big hurdle

SACRAMENTO — State Sen. Henry Mello's bill to create a Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency is on its way to the Senate Finance Committee.

The Watsonville Democrat's bill, SB 2037, passed the Senate Agriculture and Water Committee Tuesday afternoon on a 6-0 vote.

Mello said he's hoping to get quick passage through the Finance Committee, so he can get it to a vote on the Senate floor. The bill won't cost the state any more than the price of putting it on the November ballot and he said it is expected to gain easy approval.

The proposal calls for formation of a water management agency which would be comprised of members from the counties of Santa Cruz and Monterey.

It is a response to the growing question over the supply of water in two groundwater areas that serve the Pajaro Basin.

The bill, if approved by voters in November, would give the agency the power to decide if at some time in the future it needs to draw water from the San Luis Reservoir, via the state's San Felipe Project.

Locally, the proposed bill has run into some opposition from officials from the two affected counties. Santa Cruz officials have drawn a list of 19 amendments, which Mello said he would present at a citizen's advisory committee in Watson-

ville today.

"There are two main controversies," said Mello of the bill. "The first is the method of selecting the directors." Two proposals are being discussed, he said. One that would have seven members elected and another proposal for five members, two of whom would be appointed.

The other controversy surrounds the boundaries, he said. "Monterey County originally didn't want to be part of it," said Mello. "But now some agricultural interests are asking to be included."

As the boundaries are planned, only 10 percent of the district's residents would be from Monterey County, said Mello. However, there's a chance the map will be revised to include Las Lomas and other areas of north Monterey County, bringing that county's level of participation up to 20 percent.

"I was on the Board of Supervisors in 1969 when we got the authority for the San Felipe project," said Mello. "I feel it's the best source of supplemental water available to us."

Mello said he has strong personal feelings that voters should get to decide whether the agency is needed or not. "It's up to them whether to accept it or reject it."

The deadline for getting it to the governor for a signature in time for the November ballot is June 28.