Photo: California Department of Water Resources

California's legislature ended its session Saturday morning without doing anything to address the problems of the Bay-Delta, or more generally of the state's dysfunctional water governance system. As Rick explained last month, water was at the top of the agenda this year for both the Republican Governor and the Democratic leaders of the legislature. This spring, the combination of a third year of drought with widespread agreement that the state's water delivery system is unsustainable in its current form seemed likely to catalyze fundamental reform.

But much of the legislative year was spent in divisive wrangling over the state's budget. When water issues finally got to the front of the line, disagreement between legislative leaders and the Governor over funding new dams, as well as internal divisions among Democrats on the desirability of an "isolated conveyance" or peripheral canal, derailed the reform process. The package of water bills put forward by Senate leader Darrel Steinberg and Assembly leader Karen Bass, was not brought to a vote.

It's clear that the legislature's work is not done for the year, but it is not clear that they'll come back to water issues. According to the Sacramento Bee, Gov. Schwarzenegger has promised to call special sessions on education and the tax system, but is currently mulling Democrats' request for a special session on water. It's also not clear at the moment that a special session would be productive. Although Steinberg said at the end of the session that more progress had been made in a few months than over the last 40 years, his own party appeared to be in disarray on water issues during the session's end game.

Perhaps the better course of valor at this point would be to do more work laying the groundwork for reform this fall outside the pressure cooker of the legislative session, and be ready to hit the ground running in January before election fever hits with full force. Meanwhile, northern California got a little bit of early rain this weekend, and another storm is expected early this week. Let's hope its a wet winter, but not so wet that people forget how badly the state needs water reform.