Editorial: Low-hanging fruit, or the whole tree?

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One thing is clear from Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's interview Thursday with The Bee's editorial board: He's not quietly settling into lame duck status.

Clearly delighted with the historic water deal reached last week, Schwarzenegger plans to spend his last year in office addressing several other items on the state's long list of seemingly intractable issues.

It's encouraging to hear about some of the places he's looking for savings, with prisons apparently a high priority. While corrections took a hit in the current budget, prison costs have still doubled in the last decade, and now far exceed University of California spending. That's not a blueprint for long-term prosperity.

Yet in his recent comments about the budget, the governor has grown enamored of a certain phrase that is unfortunate. He contends that next year's negotiations will be particularly tough because "the low-hanging fruit and the medium-hanging fruits are all gone. I think that we are now going to the high-hanging fruits," and those will involve very painful choices.

There's no doubt the state faces a brutal task in closing a deficit that could hit $7 billion in the current fiscal year, with $7.4 billion more in red ink projected in the next. What bothers us is that his line seems to fail to recognize that the "low-hanging" fruit of the last budget was actually brutal for many.

A very partial list includes sharp increases in UC tuition and California State University fees, with most employees of both systems hit by 10 percent pay cuts.

About half of the state parks are cutting their hours or days. SSI payments to the aged, blind, and disabled were cut 6 percent. Domestic violence shelter funding has vanished. And, of course, state workers must take three unpaid days off a month.

Some of these cuts were unavoidable, given the state's finances.

But they're not low- or even medium-hanging fruit. They're a threat to the orchard's long-term survival. And a clever turn of phrase doesn't change that reality.