

# **EDITORIAL: Another day of water wars and nary a drop of progress**

By The Bee Editorial Board

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A news conference featuring House Speaker John Boehner at a dusty Kern County field made for dramatic political theater Wednesday afternoon. But it's doubtful that the emergency drought legislation touted by Republican lawmakers will bear fruit this year for parched San Joaquin Valley farmers.

There's no doubt that Valley growers need more water. Nor is there any doubt that this continuing drought is fast becoming a kidney punch to our region's recovery from the Great Recession.

But understand: Moving water around California — either for farming or to quench the thirst of Southern California residents — always has been controversial. The battle usually pits environmentalists and fishermen against farmers and others wanting more water.

We would like to believe that in a crisis the opponents would drop their talking points and lawsuits, and find common ground so that unemployment doesn't soar and food lines don't lengthen.

Unfortunately for Valley residents, the divides among the factions are so wide that even the realities of fallow fields, hurting families and unprecedented groundwater pumping likely won't bridge the gap among big stakeholders and their political allies.

Boehner — who is in California to raise money for the National Republican Campaign Congressional Committee and an appearance on "The Tonight Show with Jay Leno" — said that "it's time for the Senate to act" on making more irrigation water available from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta and the San Joaquin River.

He and House Whip Kevin McCarthy of Bakersfield characterized the Democratic-controlled Senate as blocking California water solutions.

Nonsense, responded Sen. Dianne Feinstein in a statement: "For the past two years I have worked to pass measures to improve water supplies by expediting water transfers, increasing water banking and completing water storage feasibility studies. Last month, the House finally agreed to lift their objection to these measures."

Tit-for-tat.

But rarely a drop of progress in updating the state's antiquated water delivery and undersized water storage systems.

Given the almost complete absence of rain this winter after two consecutive drought years, the GOP proposal to suspend restoration water releases on the San Joaquin until 2015 makes sense. Barring big rainstorms soon, releases from Friant Dam will stop at the end of February for this year, anyway, according to the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation.

Moreover, the river restoration is a long-term project that won't succeed or fail based on what happens over the next 24 months.

As Feinstein pointed out, however, suspending restoration releases would likely prompt a legal challenge — as would the GOP proposal to operate the delta pumps as long as water is available.

The third part of the fast-track legislation touted by Boehner would set up a bipartisan joint House and Senate committee to come up with solutions to the state's water challenges.

If that committee is appointed, go ahead and cheer. In California's water wars, anything bipartisan represents progress.

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