

EDITORIAL: Feinstein needs to finally step up with serious water solutions

By The Bee Editorial Board

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There's no doubt that the 68-page, drought-inspired California water bill that blew like a hurricane through the House of Representatives with largely Republican support has no chance of passage in the Senate.

It's equally true that Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Tulare, lived up to his reputation of being a flamethrower by citing environmentalists' "stupid fish, their little delta smelt."

But getting the bill — which, among many things, would repeal San Joaquin River restoration efforts — signed into law was not the intent of California's GOP delegation.

The aim of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Valley Emergency Water Delivery Act (H.R. 3964) was to force U.S. Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer of California, both Democrats, to get more actively involved in addressing the drought. To a lesser extent, the bill was intended to help the re-election bid of Rep. David Valadao, R-Hanford, whose 21st District has more Democrats than Republicans.

Interestingly, the bill offered unintentional political protection for Rep. Jim Costa, D-Fresno, too. Costa crossed the aisle to support this highly flawed bill and Central Valley farmers. Maybe now the ag interests behind the Highway 41 and Highway 99 signs that blame Costa for every challenge they face — both real and imagined — will consider taking them down.

But we digress from the main point: Feinstein for many years has met with Valley farmers, especially those on the west side, to talk about the possibility of securing more reliable water deliveries. She has listened to them and accepted their campaign contributions, but the water situation — except in wet years — hasn't gotten better.

Now, with California in the midst of a historic drought, agricultural interests expect her to introduce legislation that will ease their short-term suffering and provide long-term solutions.

Water issues are difficult in California. The state is large, its needs are many and diverse, and many of the big stakeholders prefer the status quo to risking the loss of precious acre-feet of water or spending more money in new arrangements that might benefit a majority of Californians. Indeed, if water issues were easy, the state would have sorted out who gets how much to the satisfaction of most everyone generations ago.

While Nunes plays the role of headline-maker and agitator, Valadao is positioned as the reasonable Republican in the room. As he told Michael Doyle of The Bee's Washington Bureau:

"We have to make sure the crisis we're facing today is addressed. If the other side has a solution, bring it to the table. I'm happy to negotiate. Until then, I'm going to continue to fight."

As Doyle analyzed in a story following the House's passage of H.R. 3964 on Wednesday, the bill "has also seemed to goad both the Senate and the Obama administration into action." Among the actions: the announcement of federal drought aid and Feinstein's statement that she is working with California House Democrats on an alternative to the Republican bill.

We look forward to seeing Feinstein's ideas. And we'll hold Valadao to his word on being open to legitimate, good-faith negotiations. Providing meaningful drought relief for Californians will require compromise and legislation that survives a House dominated by Republicans and a Senate controlled by Democrats.

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