

EDITORIAL: U.S. Senate is tackling drought relief

By The Bee Editorial Board

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Given the far-reaching consequences of California's historic drought, it has taken too long for the U.S. Senate and President Barack Obama to become fully engaged in addressing this dire situation.

But with Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer introducing a bill on Tuesday that could provide \$300 million in drought aid and as many as 500,000 acre feet of water for communities and farmers, and with Obama scheduled to visit Fresno for the first time on Friday, it's clear that the drought finally is a top priority.

We expect that during his Fresno appearance the president will announce his support of the senators' legislation and a companion bill (H.R. 4039) introduced by Rep. Jim Costa, D-Fresno.

If Obama doesn't back these efforts, it would be a slap in the face to a region that is enduring a third consecutive year of drought and a painfully slow recovery from the Great Recession.

There is much to like in the senators' ideas. As Feinstein pointed out Tuesday morning in a conference call with The Bee editorial board, the proposed drought relief wouldn't violate the Endangered Species and Clean Water acts. This fact should help the bill gain support from lawmakers in states unaffected by the drought.

In addition to boosting irrigation water deliveries, the California Emergency Drought Relief Act of 2014 focuses on increasing safe drinking water for drought-stricken communities.

It is significant that Feinstein and Boxer put together this proposal with input from the California Farm Bureau, Westlands Water District, Friant Water Authority and Western Growers. Within minutes after the bill's introduction in the Senate, Westlands released a statement saying that it supported the legislation.

The bill also was introduced by Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley, both Democrats from Oregon. The snowpack in southern Oregon's Klamath Basin is 20% of normal, and ranchers and growers there face a bleak summer.

Michael Doyle of The Bee's Washington Bureau reported Tuesday that Feinstein and Rep. David Valadao, R-Hanford, will meet today to discuss the Senate bill. Valadao is chief author of a House drought relief bill passed last week with largely Republican support.

Valadao's bill has no chance of passage in the Senate and the legislation is vehemently opposed by Gov. Jerry Brown.

We urge Sen. Feinstein and Rep. Valadao to find common ground and help deliver desperately needed drought relief for Californians. This is not the time for politics as usual.

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