

Drought be dammed, California lawmakers look to storing water

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WASHINGTON — The California drought is stoking a congressional appetite for additional water storage, with new and larger dams back on competing menus.

The latest offering is expected Friday, as House members plan to introduce a package of bills to authorize a larger Shasta Dam, a new dam on the Upper San Joaquin River and an expanded San Luis Reservoir. Next week, a bill is expected that would call for construction of a reservoir northwest of Sacramento.

The water storage flurry comes, not coincidentally, as negotiators seek common ground on broader California drought legislation. Now lawmakers face several important tactical, political and financial questions that will shape whether the dam building proposals sink or succeed.

Rep. Jim Costa, D-Fresno, and some allies on Friday plan to introduce several other bills authorizing California water storage projects. One would green-light a new Upper San Joaquin River dam, commonly called Temperance Flat. Another would permit expansion of the San Luis Reservoir on the western side of the San Joaquin Valley, and a third would raise Shasta Dam.

Separately, Rep. John Garamendi, D-Walnut Grove, is crafting a bill to authorize a new Sites Reservoir, northwest of Sacramento and in Garamendi's district. His bill, part of a multi-pronged maneuver, could be introduced next week.

"We want to use the moment when people are focused and interested," Garamendi said. "We've got to move these projects forward."

The Republican-controlled House, on a largely party-line vote, previously passed a California drought bill that included authorizations for the same projects, but explicitly ruled out federal funding.

The new House bills, by contrast, leave open the possibility for the standard federal cost-sharing, long a part of water infrastructure in the West.

"I don't believe any of these projects are going to become a reality unless there's a cost-sharing program," Costa said.

Garamendi concurred, stressing that "the federal government has to be involved" if the water projects are to stay afloat. Costa's bills essentially say that once the Interior Department signs off on cost-benefit studies showing the projects are feasible, the projects are authorized for construction.

The state's Department of Water Resources estimated the proposed Sites Reservoir would cost between \$2.3 billion and \$3.2 billion or more. Current construction estimates for Temperance Flat hover around \$2.5 billion.

Expanding San Luis Reservoir would cost an estimated \$360 million, though much of that would pay for seismic safety work on the dam, according to federal officials. Raising Shasta Dam by 18.5 feet in order to increase reservoir storage capacity would cost an estimated \$1.1 billion.

A key backer of the House-passed bill, Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Tulare, insisted in an earlier interview that the new water storage projects could proceed without federal funding, as is specified in the House-passed legislation he helped write.

"The potential for storing more, to have more available for everybody, whether it is farms, cities or environmental use, can be realized by building projects and by removing the roadblocks that are unnecessarily put there by bureaucracy or politics," Rep. Doug LaMalfa, R-Richvale in Butte County, said during the earlier House debate.

Tactically, supporters of new California water storage projects must now figure out their next steps. One traditional approach would be to slide one or more projects into broader drought legislation born from House and Senate discussions. This approach has both promise and peril.

A Senate drought bill introduced by Democratic Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer did not include the new dams. But in an enthusiastically received speech before the Association of California Water Agencies this week, Feinstein explicitly stressed the need for additional storage. Feinstein told the water agency officials that an upcoming state water bond should include at least \$3 billion for water storage.

"Storage is not just for farms and businesses, but could also benefit municipalities, natural habitats and fish species," she said.

Costa spoke with Feinstein and Boxer about California water recently, while the lawmakers were accompanying President Barack Obama on Air Force One during a trip to Fresno. He held out the possibility that water storage gets added to a final drought bill.

"That's the glue that holds the (drought bill) together," Costa said of the water projects that enjoy Republican support.

The potential problem, Garamendi cautioned, is that some water storage projects could also weigh down the larger drought bill for which a sense of urgency is important. The Friends of the Earth environmental group, for instance, warns that raising Shasta Dam would flood upstream

rivers and streams, while Temperance Flat would flood the popular San Joaquin River Gorge and potentially undermine existing hydroelectric projects.

More broadly, tacking multiple dam constructions onto a drought-relief measure could turn off Republican budget hawks, which could be one explanation for why the bill passed earlier by the House excluded the federal funding.

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