

Feinstein pleads for GOP votes on California drought bill

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Sen. Dianne Feinstein [called on](#) reluctant GOP senators Thursday to support her drought bill, which she altered earlier this month to win support from Senate Republicans.

The California Democrat has been pushing hard to get more water to San Joaquin Valley farms, [urging federal agencies to relax environmental rules](#) to do so.

A Capitol Hill source close to meetings between lawmakers and administration officials said the officials “were clearly feeling all the pressure.”

“Since the bill was first introduced in February, my staff has worked around the clock to find five Republican votes necessary to reach that number,” Feinstein said in a rare public appeal. “We are very close to 60, but we’re not there yet.”

Feinstein is attempting to [fast-track her legislation](#), co-sponsored by Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., through the Senate without committee approval in order to speed a conference with the [bill the House passed](#) in February.

Written by conservatives from the Central Valley, the [House bill](#) would mandate more water shipments from the delta to San Joaquin Valley farms and override the Endangered Species Act.

Feinstein’s bill would increase “flexibility” for agencies to manage the drought, a term that has come to mean easing environmental rules to increase water deliveries. She dropped spending for some projects from her bill to allay GOP budget concerns.

[Environmentalists](#) have grown increasingly skeptical of Feinstein’s negotiations with House Republicans.

“Frankly most of what’s left (in Feinstein’s bill) is provisions regarding the minutiae of Endangered Species Act implementation,” said one environmental lawyer who did not want his name used. “To be blunt, we’re trying to figure out what’s intended by those and we don’t have a good answer.”

The maneuvering has also hardened environmentalist opposition to Gov. Jerry Brown’s [twin-tunnel project to bypass the delta and take water south](#). Environmentalists said relaxation of wildlife protections during the drought belies promises by tunnel backers that the project will lead to habitat restoration in the delta.

“What we’re learning in this drought is that when it gets real, and a senator [complains to the secretaries of Interior and Commerce](#), boom, forget about an operating agreement,” said Jon Rosenfeld, a conservation biologist at the Bay Institute in San Francisco.

The environmental lawyer added, “If the whole idea of the governor’s twin tunnels is to build a large facility and then to trust that it be operated in a way consistent with best available science, it’s tough to trust that will happen if Congress simultaneously is dictating operation of the project.”

A [new report](#) by the Center for Responsive Politics and Southern California Public Radio shows that the 600,000-acre Westlands Water District, representing farmers in Fresno and Kings Counties, has spent a record \$600,000 on lobbying this year.