

Strengths of Sens. Boxer, Feinstein may help conquer drought

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Sen. Dianne Feinstein's ability to work across party lines could spell success for a drought relief bill that she and fellow California Sen. Barbara Boxer introduced.

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Senate Bill 2198 highlights

- Keeps the Delta Cross Channel Gates open as much as possible to send more water south from the Bay Delta.
- Reduces regulatory barriers to water transfers among water districts during April and May.

- Mandates the federal government approve or deny water storage project requests from states in 10 days.
- Allows drought-stricken states to be eligible for federal disaster funds if the president makes an emergency declaration.

WASHINGTON – When it comes to water issues, stereotypes of California’s two Democratic senators ring true.

Barbara Boxer is the firecracker, guarding environmental protections, while Dianne Feinstein is the negotiator, working with Republicans and Democrats.

But those differences might make the pair particularly suited to get a California drought relief bill approved by the Senate and the House of Representatives and signed by President Barack Obama.

Environmentalists have sway in the Democratic-controlled Senate. GOP support is crucial in the Republican-controlled House.

Republicans advocate rolling back environmental regulations to provide more water to farmers in the Central Valley and points south. Democrats want agencies to make more water available while maintaining environmental protections.

Despite their philosophical differences, Feinstein and Boxer were able to agree on the drought-relief bill and jointly introduced the legislation in February, calling for, among other things, agencies to use as much flexibility as possible when enforcing water pumping regulations.

“Everybody in California has a direct stake in drought relief,” said Jack Pitney, a political science professor at Claremont McKenna College. The urgency of the situation plus the skills that Feinstein and Boxer demonstrate, Pitney said, might make this the year Congress will pass a bill.

“Their strengths are complementary,” Pitney said. “Boxer is good at mobilizing the liberal base. Feinstein is good at working with Republicans.”

Republicans in the House of Representatives, though, criticize Boxer and Feinstein for moving too slowly. In February, the House passed its own drought relief bill that relaxed environmental protections.

Matt Sparks, spokesman for the House Republican Whip Kevin McCarthy, said, “The onus is on the Senate Democrat majority to put forth California water legislation that can pass the full Senate.

“If 60 votes are required to move this process forward, then Senate legislation to provide relief to California farmers and families must be able to attract necessary bipartisan support.”

Boxer is viewed as the liberal from Marin County, said Steve Erie, a professor at UC San Diego, who has written extensively on California water. Feinstein, he said, “is a deal maker.”

DIFFERENT APPROACHES

Feinstein and Boxer have a history of being on different pages for managing California’s water.

In 2001, Feinstein introduced a bill with Rep. Ken Calvert, R-Corona, that would have streamlined the review process for certain California water infrastructure projects. Boxer and Rep. George Miller, R-Martinez, with help from the environmental community, killed the effort.

Last month, Feinstein joined five California Republicans arguing that the Interior and Commerce departments should relax certain regulations during a rainstorm to allow California to collect as much rainwater as possible.

Under federal law, agencies can pump water out of the southern Bay Delta within a range. Lawmakers asked the agencies to pump out as much water as possible.

“(The) existing protections for endangered fish are more than adequate,” the letter they signed stated. “On the other hand, our constituents’ farms and communities are facing potential devastation.”

But Boxer sent her own letter with a softer tone: “We must also ensure that we meet health and human safety requirements in the state.”

POINTS OF AGREEMENT

This time, Boxer and Feinstein have found common ground. Feinstein took the lead on the bill, as she typically does with water issues. Republican criticism quickly focused on the \$300 million price tag. So she introduced a reworked version earlier this month that eliminated relief funds in an effort to win support.

The new bill got GOP nods – and prompted green groups to criticize the cuts.

Environmental groups, such as the Natural Resources Defense Council, said that during the initial bill drafting process, Boxer and her staff worked to keep the environmental protections as strong as possible. In contrast, Feinstein was more concerned with the irrigation needs of the agricultural sector.

That division of labor and opinion is familiar to Aubrey Bettencourt, of the California Water Alliance, an agriculture advocacy group.

“Senator Boxer's activity has centrally focused on issues of environmental impact and water quality, while Senator Feinstein's engagement has been more to the larger scale conversation of balancing environmental and economic priorities,” Bettencourt said.

COUNTING SENATE VOTES

The newly revised Senate drought relief bill is expected to skip a committee vote and go straight to a vote of the full Senate. A vote has not yet been scheduled, but Democratic Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, in charge of scheduling, has signed on as a co-sponsor.

Boxer and Feinstein will need 60 votes to end debate and move for a vote on the full bill. Vote counters report four Republicans and all 55 Senate Democrats are on board.

Sen. Dean Heller, R-Nev., has signed on as the sole Republican co-sponsor. Other tentative Republican “yes” votes include Sens. Tom Coburn and James Inhofe, of Oklahoma, and Sen. Saxby Chambliss, of Georgia.

“In times of disaster, the Senate has set aside its differences, come together and worked to help the country. This is such a time,” Feinstein said.

Feinstein’s and Boxer’s targets include Sens. John McCain and Jeff Flake of Arizona, as well as Sens. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska and David Vitter of Louisiana.

AFTER THE SENATE

California political watchers are split on the chances of the bill actually passing. Some believe that the situation is so dire that members will be forced to act. Others, though, say the situation in Congress is too acrimonious for agreement on anything.

If the bill is passed out of the Senate it likely will need to be amended for a less environmentally friendly House version.

This is when Boxer’s and Feinstein’s different roles and constituencies could again prove useful, with Boxer bringing along the liberal base and Feinstein working with the opposing party.

“Barbara Boxer is Ms. Outside and Dianne Feinstein is Ms. Inside,” Pitney said.

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