

# Senator Feinstein fishing for Democratic support on drought bill

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Kitty Felde | May 7th, 2014, 11:29am

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### Thomas Dreisbach/NPR

California's drought is a continuing concern for the state's farmers, many of whom are having to let fields go fallow.

Senator Dianne Feinstein floated the latest version of her water bill past some of its biggest skeptics: fellow Democrats from California.

Feinstein hosted a closed door meeting Wednesday morning with more than a half-dozen House members from northern and central California. Feinstein described it as a “private meeting” and didn’t offer any details, except to say she thought her House colleagues were “happy with this.”

Feinstein introduced a drought relief bill back in February. The [California Emergency Drought Relief Act of 2014](#), co-sponsored with Barbara Boxer, would make it easier for federal agencies to move water to where it’s most needed, but still adhering to the Endangered Species Act.

A deal with leadership will get the measure to the Senate floor without a hearing. But so far, no floor action has been scheduled – in part because of concerns from House Democrats who are concerned the bill will hurt farmers and fishermen in Northern California.

Emerging from the meeting, Congressman Mike Thompson of St. Helena said Feinstein made changes “that alleviate some of our concerns.” East Bay Congressman George Miller, who has tussled with Feinstein over water policy through the years, called the meeting “encouraging,” but added: “We’re not there on all the points yet.”

House Republicans – plus Fresno Democrat Jim Costa – passed their own drought relief measure in early February. [The Sacramento-San Joaquin Valley Emergency Water Delivery Act](#) preempts environmental restoration and rewrites California water laws, something that helps Central Valley farmers.

Congressman Costa says he went into the meeting with Feinstein already knowing his colleagues’ “default positions.” He complains that it’s “difficult” for his colleagues up north to “look at the big picture,” which is fixing the state’s “broken water system.”

Costa notes California’s water system was designed for 18-20 million people. He says these continuous dry periods – “you can call it drought, you can call it climate change” – are going to be the “new norm” unless we decide to move “beyond some of our parochial interests and look at it as a statewide effort.”

Democrats aren't just concerned about the specifics in Feinstein's bill; they're also worried about the legislative process that follows. John Garamendi of Walnut Grove says "the outcome of a conference committee concerns me." He says if the Senate passes Feinstein's bill, it would be reconciled with the GOP-led House version that "eviscerated environmental laws and the state constitution."

Costa says there's always another option: do nothing. "We can continue to be fixated on our parochial interests and blame the other part of the state for our water woes," he says, but doing nothing guarantees continued water crises — not only for farmers in the Central Valley and fishermen in the north, but also for thirsty consumers in Southern California.

*Correction: an earlier version of this story identified Congressman Garamendi's district as Walnut Creek.*