

Valley communities lobby Congress one more time for drought help

By Michael
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Westlands Water District general manager Tom Birmingham, left, at a 2013 water meeting. FRESNO BEE FILE PHOTO

Seventeen California cities and counties urged Congress on Tuesday to complete drought legislation that's currently hung up in closed-door negotiations.

The municipal resolutions passed in recent weeks by small towns like Dos Palos and counties like Kern and Kings were presented to the House Natural Resources Committee as part of a public drumbeat that included a several-hour long hearing on easing environmental rules.

"It's continuing to make the case that we have to move forward," Rep. Jim Costa, D-Fresno, said of the hearing Tuesday, adding later that "people in California are wondering if we in Congress are capable of coming together."

Costa presented the local drought resolutions during a hearing that on its surface was about six different bills centering on the Endangered Species Act. He authored one of the bills, designed to boost water exports to San Joaquin Valley farms.

Costa's legislation would effectively minimize water delivery restrictions imposed as a means to protect Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta fish listed under the Endangered Species Act.

"It would significantly increase water supply for the benefit of workers, farmers and consumers alike," testified Tom Birmingham, general manager of the Westlands Water District.

Tom Barcellos, a Tipton farmer and board member of the Lower Tule River Irrigation District, added in a written statement that "it's time for Congress to provide clear direction" on how to apply the Endangered Species Act in the Delta" and warned that "if nothing changes, 2015 will be a catastrophe."

Dubbed the More Water and Security for Californians Act, Costa's legislation appears not to be going anywhere this year. The Obama administration opposes it, as do some other California Democrats, and Congress has only a few business days remaining before lawmakers rush back home to resume campaigning.

But as stalking horses, Costa's legislation and the five Republican-authored bills considered Tuesday serve several purposes. Not least, the bills keep heating the decades-old debate over the trade-off between endangered species



protections and human demands -- a debate at the center of the California drought bill negotiations.

"The central reason for reduced water supplies in California stems from drought, not from implementation of the ESA," said Gary Frazer, assistant director for Endangered Species at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Underscoring the state's drought-driven political divisions, Rep. Jared Huffman, D-San Rafael, concurred with Frazer that "environmental restrictions have had minimal effect on water deliveries" in the state.

"The narrative of this hearing is all about positioning the Endangered Species Act as the scapegoat," said Huffman, who formerly chaired the state Assembly's Water, Parks and Wildlife Committee.

Huffman and other Northern California Democrats, including those whose districts span part of the Delta, are largely skeptical of the still-secret drought package that was originally authored by House Republicans.

The GOP-controlled House passed an ambitious, 68-page California water bill in February, without a committee hearing. A farmers' wish list, the House bill limits a landmark 1992 law that directed more water to protect the Delta. It removes wild-and-scenic protections from a half mile of the Merced River, lengthens federal irrigation contracts to 40 years and makes it easier to move water around the state, among other provisions

The Senate countered in May with a slimmed-down 16-page bill passed by unanimous consent, also without a committee hearing.

Since then, there have been hints that Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein of California and backers of the House bill have closed their major differences, while Democratic Sen. Barbara Boxer and the Obama administration remain cautious. All of the participants in the negotiations have sworn themselves to secrecy.

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