

House Republicans, Costa join for last-ditch shot at California water bill

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The new House California water bill includes language designed to boost water exports south of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, seen in this file aerial photo.

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WASHINGTON — House Republicans joined by Fresno Democrat Jim Costa late Tuesday started a last-ditch maneuver to pass California water legislation that is friendly to farmers and frightening to environmentalists.

Acting fast in the dying days of a lame-duck Congress, the seven California lawmakers [introduced a bill](#) that consolidates some ideas they think could pass both the Senate and House.

[The 28-page bill](#) is cast as a temporary measure, and it omits the water storage project authorizations and some other provisions that had made a previous House bill politically controversial.

“House leadership understands that action needs to be taken before Congress adjourns,” said Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Tulare. “We are offering a compromise based on the Senate water bill in a further demonstration that a bipartisan majority in the House is both willing and able to act.”

The bill introduced by Rep. David Valadao, R-Hanford, as the chief sponsor has the strong backing of House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy of Bakersfield and is effectively guaranteed to pass the Republican-controlled House sometime before the scheduled Dec. 11 congressional adjournment. The bill has the backing of Costa but is likely to be opposed by most other House Democrats.

In theory, the water bill could pass the House either as a stand-alone bill or as an inclusion into a much larger, must-pass omnibus spending bill needed to keep the federal government operating.

“For the sake of the people of California, we can no longer delay action,” McCarthy said.

The real test for what is billed as the California Emergency Drought Relief Act will come not in the House but in the Senate, where for months Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein had engaged in closely held negotiations with House Republicans.

Late last month, Feinstein called off the secret talks and said she would try again to pass California water legislation early next Congress through what she described as “regular order.” On Tuesday night, Feinstein’s spokesman Tom Mentzer said the senator’s office had just received the House bill and still was reviewing it.

Politically, the House bill with its provisions designed to last 18 months puts Feinstein in a potential bind. The specific language in certain cases closely tracks language she previously has voiced support for, House Republicans say. At the same time, some of Feinstein’s fellow California Democrats have urged her to resist accepting water legislation until more inclusive negotiations can begin next year.

“A bill of this magnitude requires public hearings and regular committee process,” seven House Democrats from Northern California and the Sacramento Valley declared in a joint statement last month.

The new House bill includes language designed to boost water exports south of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. It mandates “temporary operational flexibility” for water project operations during early storms, and it spells out assorted protections for Sacramento Valley water users. Much of the language is specific and technical, with the implications not immediately obvious to the lay reader.

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