

EDITORIAL: Facts support passage of drought relief legislation



Irrigation water runs along the dried-up ditch between the rice farms to provide water for the rice fields on May 1 in Richvale, Calif. A study of tree rings shows that California's drought is the worst in at least 1,200 years.

JAE C. HONG — Associated Press

One of the oldest rules in politics is, when the facts are on your side, you cite the facts; when the facts aren't on your side, you pound the table.

Over the last few days, opponents of The California Emergency Drought Relief Act, which was introduced in the House of Representatives on Tuesday, have been yelling about water grabs, protesting the timing of the bill's introduction and doing all they can to divert attention from the facts — both pertaining to this legislation and to the cruel realities of our state's prolonged drought.

So, let's start with the facts.

This drought is the worst that California has experienced in at least 1,200 years. So says a study published by the American Geophysical Union and cited by a Washington Post blog Thursday. Not only have we received little rain, but the lack of precipitation has been intensified by record-breaking high temperatures. Moreover, the fertile agricultural fields of the San Joaquin Valley are suffering through an "exceptional drought," the most severe classification.

Yes, it has rained lately in California. Thank goodness it has. But much more rain is needed to restore our aquifers, fill our reservoirs and reverse the economic hardship inflicted on our state and, in particular, the Valley, by the drought.

The bill (HR 5781) introduced by Rep. David Valadao, R-Hanford and supported by GOP leadership provides the flexibility and resources to give farmers in the Valley and elsewhere a fighting chance to grow their crops and put people back to work in 2015. In a nutshell, the bill would allow the Bureau of Reclamation the freedom to hold more winter rain and snow and then distribute it to areas in need. Not only would this flexibility help farmers and rural communities, but it would benefit the environment as well.

This legislation is the product of months of talks and negotiations earlier this year involving Republican and Democrats in both the House and the U.S. Senate and is the result of thoughtful compromise. The bill doesn't amend the Endangered Species Act or existing biological opinions. It leaves decision-making about habitat, protected species and water quality to federal environmental agencies. But it would reduce the flow of water through the Sacramento-Joaquin River Delta to the Pacific Ocean and pump more water to the south — as long as that pumping doesn't harm protected fish such as delta smelt, salmon and steelhead.

Moreover, these changes would be temporary, as they would end in September of 2016 or upon the governor ending California's drought declaration.

Opponents are trying to paint this bill as detrimental to the environment and the result of secret negotiations. Again, let's examine the facts. In a phone interview with The Editorial Board on Friday, Rep. Jim Costa, D-Fresno, pointed out that this proposal is similar to Sen. Dianne Feinstein's bill that was passed under unanimous consent by the Senate in February.

Passage of Feinstein's Emergency Drought Relief Act then set the stage for negotiations — and compromise — with Valadao, who earlier had received partisan House approval of a bill that was extreme and over the top. Early on, Northern California Democrats, many of which are supported by environmentalists, were involved in the negotiations. But they drew firm lines in the sand and quit the talks.

Valadao's bill is reasonable and much needed. It deserves the support of Sen. Feinstein and Sen. Barbara Boxer and the California delegation in the House of Representatives.

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