

Emergency drought bill deserves to die

By the Editorial
Board

House Republicans intend to jam through a California drought-relief bill early next week that would suspend some state water rights and environmental law to maximize water diversions from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

This is no way to address an issue as important to California as water. It is doomed to fail in the Senate and deserves to die. California's congressional delegation should be working on a compromise that involves all interested parties, not ramming through a bill during the final days of the lame-duck session.

Late Friday, the Obama administration came out in opposition to the bill, saying in a statement that "it fails to equitably address critical elements of California's complex water challenges" and "the bill appears to include a number of potentially conflicting mandates which can create confusion and undermine environmental laws, making it ripe for future litigation."

Central Valley Republicans have proposed the bill, [HR 5781](#), and plan to bring it to a vote as early as Monday without going through committee hearings. The new bill deserves a full public hearing so that we know its full implications for California.

The House Rules Committee won't allow amendments to this problematic bill, which is unfortunate. The 26-page bill is replete with technical language, directed at environmental laws and regulations governing California water policy.

Rep. Jared Huffman, D-San Rafael, told the Rules Committee that the bill, like a previous version, would micromanage the state's water system without input from federal, state or local water officials. He warned that it would violate state environmental laws, misstates federal water contract law, and would have negative implications for fisheries and Indian water rights.

Rep. David Valadao, R-Hanford, who introduced the California Emergency Drought Relief Act of 2014, claimed the bill has bipartisan support and approval of California's Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer.

Boxer, however, made clear she opposes the bill, saying in an emailed statement to The Bee: "The problem here is that Republicans insisted on a secretive process, and only bad things can happen when your process is secretive. ... and now they are trying jam through legislation that will only reignite California's water wars."

On Friday, Feinstein said in an email to The Bee, "There are some provisions in HR 5781 I support and there are some provisions I don't support, so we'll have to wait and see what action the House takes."

[Feinstein dropped talks with House Republicans](#) in November and said she would reopen negotiations in January. That is a reasonable approach. Any legislation affecting California water policy deserves a full hearing with input from the varied interest in Northern California, the Central Valley and the south.

The bill is backed by House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Bakersfield; Rep. Tom McClintock; R-Elk Grove; Rep. Doug LaMalfa, R-Richvale, and others who would export water to Central Valley and Southern California at the expense of the environment and other water users.

The drought is hurting farmers and cities; it is challenging for all of us. However, a near-unanimous California Legislature approved placing a \$7.5 billion water bond measure before voters, showing that changes in state water policy can be achieved through consensus.

But trying to remedy the problem for some Californians while excluding others from the discussion will, like Boxer said, reignite water wars.