

Opinion: Once again, water plan stalemated

By Dan Walters

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As the most severe winter storm in at least a half-decade bore down on California on Tuesday, 3,000 miles away in Washington, the House voted, largely along party lines, for a California drought relief bill.

It was immediately declared dead on arrival in the Senate, and President Barack Obama threatened to veto it.

It is, in other words, gridlock as usual in the nation's capital and, it would appear, gridlock as usual in the nation's largest congressional delegation.

Led by Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy of Bakersfield, Republican members, along with San Joaquin Valley Democrat Jim Costa, voted for the bill, while other California Democrats opposed it.

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Afterward, not surprisingly, harsh words were exchanged between the two factions. McCarthy, et al., pointed out that much of the measure mirrored a plan that Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein had floated, while Democrats said it was a secretive water grab that would damage the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

It was, in effect, Washington's version of California's internal – and eternal – battle that predates the drought by decades: How much Northern California water should flow southward to San Joaquin Valley farmers and Southern California cities?

The in-state version is over the plan, championed by Gov. Jerry Brown and water users south of the Delta, to bore tunnels beneath the Delta to make such shipments more reliable. Most environmental groups oppose the project as creating the plumbing that could be used to divert so much water that the Delta's fragile environment would be irreparably damaged.

It implies that the stalemate in Washington is not so much over temporarily easing restrictions on water exports due to drought as it is over whether the federal government will participate in the twin tunnels project, and the construction of more water storage facilities, as Brown also wants.

Feinstein, meanwhile, is caught in the middle. She tried, but failed, to forge a compromise of some sort on the drought package, apparently as a precursor to a larger agreement on the tunnels, storage and other issues not directly related to the drought. But then she opposed the GOP's drought plan this week, as did Brown's administration.

Republicans have accused her of backing away, disavowing provisions that she had previously proposed, under pressure from fellow Sen. Barbara Boxer and other Democratic liberals, while Boxer has accused Republicans of torpedoing the efforts by demanding too many changes in environmental protections.

And that's where the issue sits, with nothing happening but exchanges of accusations. Not only will there be no



immediate drought relief for farmers, but the decades-long battle over more reservoirs, the tunnels and the shipment of Northern California water southward will continue indefinitely.

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