

Capitol Hill Californians will push for drought legislation again

By Michael
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David Valadao, greeting supporters at a 2014 election-night party in Hanford, introduced the House of Representatives' versions of California water legislation last Congress. He said Tuesday in Washington, D.C., after he was sworn in for a second term that lawmakers are considering their options for another run at a federal water bill.

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WASHINGTON — Another year, another California water fight.

This week, as the 114th Congress commences, lawmakers prepare to revive anti-drought proposals that divided the state last year. Tactics and strategies are still being crafted and the outcome is uncertain, as are the lessons that may or may not have been learned.

"We're still figuring out what our next step is going to be," said Rep. David Valadao, R-Hanford. "We have to see what's possible."

Valadao introduced the House of Representatives' versions of California water legislation last Congress. The first passed the Republican-controlled House on a nearly party line vote in February, over the opposition of Northern California Democrats. A second version passed in December.

Both versions steered more water to farmers south of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. Both drew veto threats from the Obama administration and resistance from California Democratic Sen. Barbara Boxer, as well as from Gov. Jerry Brown's administration. Both died.

“While there is no current congressional proposal on California water, we hope that any effort respects current state law, takes a collaborative approach to long-term solutions and includes all stakeholders in the process,” Richard Stapler, deputy secretary for communications at the California Natural Resources Agency, said Tuesday.

Delta area lawmakers, in particular, decried the secrecy surrounding last year’s closed-door negotiations convened by House Republicans and California Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein. Neither the House nor Senate conducted committee hearings on the legislation.

The private maneuvering bred mistrust and seemed to harden positions. Those privy to last year’s negotiations, though, maintain that it would have done no good to include Northern California representatives because they would never have voted for the legislation anyway.

“We did everything we could,” Valadao insisted, adding that “we have to make sure everyone at the table is sincere.”

On Tuesday, Feinstein said she plans to introduce her latest California water bill “soon.”

“We need a bill that will help all of California, while maintaining environmental protections and continuing to use the best available science in determining how we protect endangered species,” Feinstein said in a statement.

Feinstein added that she thinks “it will be possible to use improved science and regulatory flexibility to pinpoint when water must be released to protect species and when water can be moved to help Californians struggling from drought.”

The Capitol Hill environment has changed, with uncertain consequences for the California water effort. With the swearing-in of the new Congress on Tuesday, Republicans enjoy a 246-188 margin, with one vacancy. More significantly, the GOP also controls the Senate, with what amounts to a 54-46 majority.

The Senate power shift brings Alaska Republican Sen. Lisa Murkowski front and center as the new chairwoman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee. Murkowski and her staff have already become acquainted with California water issues; now, they will have more say on key questions like oversight, scheduling and packaging, as well as legislative details.

Committee spokesman Robert Dillon said Tuesday that Murkowski remains open to working on California drought legislation.

“There was considerable progress last year,” Dillon said, “and we will wait to see what Sen. Feinstein and other members of the California delegation want to do this year.”

The ranking Democrat on the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, Sen. Maria Cantwell of Washington state, has a lifetime voting score of 90% from the League of Conservation Voters. Depending on how collaboratively the Senate operates under GOP control, Cantwell’s role could prove to be important.

Other personnel changes could also influence the course of water legislation this Congress.

The well-connected chief water staff aide for Rep. Devin Nunes, the Tulare Republican who has played a key role in drafting the water bills, has moved over to new responsibilities with the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. Nunes himself has become chairman of the Intelligence panel, a move that enhances his power, but will also demand more of his time.

Nunes’ most aggressively vocal foe on water legislation, former Rep. George Miller, D-Martinez, has now retired after 40 years in the House. This shift, too, can cut several directions. Miller’s absence deprives Northern California of its most experienced water expert, and the one closest to House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi. Potentially, though, Miller’s departure could also freshen up the bargaining room, liberating lawmakers from the burden of re-litigating old battles.

A familiar lobbying contingent still fans out across Capitol Hill. Westlands Water District, keenly interested in the outcome, paid several lobbying firms \$680,000 during the first nine months of last year, records show. The Metropolitan Water District of Southern California reported spending \$670,000 on lobbying in the same period, while other water districts throughout the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys paid lobbyists of their own.

“No, this work won’t be tidy,” House Speaker John Boehner acknowledged Tuesday, speaking of the myriad legislative fights ahead. “The battle of ideas never ends, and never should.”

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