

Boxer's actions often angered Valley, but she's also recognized for doing good

By John
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Accompanying President Barack Obama on a trip to Fresno County last February were, from left, California Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer and, at far right, Rep. Jim Costa.

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As a liberal Bay Area Democrat, Sen. Barbara Boxer wasn't the most popular politician in the central San Joaquin Valley.

Boxer — who on Thursday announced she wouldn't seek re-election in 2016 — earned the ire of many in the region by supporting the controversial San Joaquin River restoration project and President Barack Obama's Affordable Care Act. Republicans blame her for the failure late last year of negotiations on a compromise California water bill. They say she's been more helpful to the state's left-leaning coastal regions than its more conservative inland regions.

To say Boxer has never helped the Valley, however, would be wrong.

She stood up for Valley poultry ranchers and citrus farmers, for horses and mule packers operating in Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Park wilderness areas, for keeping federal agencies — and their employees — in downtown

Fresno and for the farm bill's Market Access Program, which helps overseas promotions and advertising. And her state director, former Fresno City Council Member Tom Bohigian, has been locally based and in that post for 10 years — part of a more than two-decade career with Boxer.

"It's clear that Barbara and I disagreed on a number of Valley issues, most recently on water," said Rep. Jim Costa, a Fresno Democrat, "but she has been constructive as it related to passage of the farm bills, and worked with various farm organizations on issues of unfair trade issues with certain countries and funding for pest detection and eradication."

Bill Mattos, president of the Modesto-based California Poultry Federation, recalled Boxer's role in the battle over labeling chickens as fresh. A state law said chickens could only be labeled fresh if they were kept at 26 degrees or higher, but the federal standard for fresh was 1 degree or higher, so imported chicken could be frozen, imported into the state, thawed and sold as fresh. Boxer, Mattos said, "was amazing," participating in news conferences and meetings across the nation.

The law now says chicken must be kept at 26 degrees or above to be called fresh.

"Barbara Boxer was always with us," Mattos said. "She was with us from the beginning."

Joel Nelsen, president of California Citrus Mutual, an Exeter-based citrus growers lobby, also speaks fondly of Boxer.

The relationship started in 1998 when a dispute erupted over the import of lemons from Argentina. California citrus growers ended up losing that fight, but they did battle the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Boxer "became our champion," Nelsen said. "We've always had good access to that office, and access to her senior staff."

She worked with the citrus industry on trade issues, made a personal Valley visit after the disastrous 1998 freeze, pointed out how the federal government shutdown would harm the agriculture industry and was helpful on regulatory issues, Nelsen said.

"People don't see all these things, because you can't always put out press releases," Nelsen said.

This led to Boxer's 2010 re-election bid, when she earned California Citrus Mutual's endorsement, though Nelsen said he was disappointed she didn't support last year's state water bill.

Even Rep. Devin Nunes, a Tulare Republican and one of Boxer's harshest critics, gave her — as well as Sen. Dianne Feinstein — credit for helping on the horse-and-mule packers issue.

Still, on the whole, Nunes is critical of Boxer, as are other Valley conservatives. Her support mostly was on smaller issues that enjoyed broad political support, he said.

Critics say much of Boxer's shortcomings revolve around water. Nunes said Boxer "hasn't even tried to be helpful" on the issue. When negotiations were proceeding to find compromise last year on a water bill, he said when Boxer was included in the meetings, she went to the media and said things that were untrue.

"I fully understand that we have a diverse state, and extreme, left-wing people live along the coastal regions, but ... I haven't found her to be an honest broker to work with. Feinstein and I may vehemently disagree, but at the end of the day, we try to work together," Nunes said.

Boxer has visited the Valley — rarely, say critics, and more often than is realized, counter supporters. But certainly more often during re-election years, which came in 1998, 2004 and 2010 after her initial Senate election in 1992. These visits were at times geared toward Boxer's small cadre of ardent supporters, like the 2010 visit when she touted her support for abortion rights and criticized Republican opponent Carly Fiorina for supporting "tax breaks for the wealthy."

Her most recent trip came last February, when she accompanied Obama on a farmland tour of the west side.

In four winning elections, Boxer never was able to capture Fresno County — or win more than 45.4% of the vote.

It's because her liberal politics were out of step with the region, said businessman Michael Der Manouel Jr., who is chairman of the Lincoln Club of Fresno County. And, he added, her legacy will be that there won't be one.

"Was she at all consequential in national politics?" he asked rhetorically. "No. Did she have any significant achievements in the Senate? No. Did she do anything to make the quality of life better in California? No. Did she do anything to improve the fortunes of the Central Valley? No. So in my judgment, she's been a wasted paycheck for 24 years."

Der Manouel would love to see Fiorina run again. Another name being mentioned is Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearingin, who last year ran a solid race for state controller but lost to Bay Area Democrat Betty Yee.

Tim Clark, Swearingin's political consultant, didn't push the idea — but he also didn't dismiss it.

"The mayor has had preliminary discussions with her team about the future, including the early rumors that Sen. Boxer may retire," Clark said. "Now that Sen. Boxer has announced her retirement, the mayor will likely discuss that seat again with her team. But, the mayor has always said that she believes her strength is serving as an executive, rather than a legislator. However, nothing is set in stone, and now that Sen. Boxer has announced her retirement, we'll have those discussions."

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