

Boxer vows no more ‘secret’ talks on drought bill

By Michael
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Rancher Jon Pedotti walks on the cracked remains of a parched lake bed on his ranch located along San Simeon Creek in the Santa Lucia Mountain foothills of Cambria, Calif., Nov. 2014.

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WASHINGTON — Democratic Sen. Barbara Boxer on Wednesday set down some markers on California water legislation, denouncing “secret negotiations” and stressing the importance of seeking statewide support.

While dismissing as “absurd and ridiculous” Republican charges that she single-handedly sank last year’s anti-drought efforts, Boxer said she’d strenuously fight this year if she must. Her declarations underscore the complications facing the Central Valley lawmakers and others now preparing another bill.

“People in my state don’t like secret negotiations,” Boxer said, “and I will not be part of it. Never. I don’t believe it works, and people don’t trust the process.”

Last year, House Republicans and Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein kept tight wraps on their talks designed to craft a California water bill, with Rep. David Valadao, R-Calif., saying in November that members had taken a “vow of secrecy.” Northern California lawmakers complained they were shut out altogether.

The protracted negotiations nearly bore fruit at the end of last Congress, even as they attracted criticism. In December, the House by a largely partisan 230-182 margin passed [a 26-page bill](#) that essentially reflected what Feinstein, the Republicans and Rep. Jim Costa, D-Calif., had agreed to.

The House bill boosted water exports south of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, encouraged the completion of water storage project feasibility studies and sought to capture more runoff from early storms, among other provisions. It dropped some more controversial provisions previously proposed by the House, such as a repeal of an ambitious [San Joaquin River restoration plan](#).

The Obama administration opposed the House bill, as did the administration of California Gov. Jerry Brown, and it was never taken up by the Senate. If the package is the starting point for this year's efforts, Boxer indicated, it has a ways to go.

"I am not going to pass a bill here that the state opposes," Boxer said. "That is a 100 percent non-starter."

In particular, Boxer told reporters that she is "not going to turn Northern California against Southern California, or the Valley against anybody else." Instead, she is touting her own "[Water in the 21st Century Act](#)," which would set up \$1.95 billion in loans and grants over five years for water conservation, recycling and related projects.

"We need to make more water available," Boxer said.

Feinstein told Boxer's office on Wednesday that she would support the bill.

But the grants and loans do not go far enough for California Republicans, with Rep. Tom McClintock, R-Calif., saying in an interview that a water bill serving the state should be "as comprehensive as possible."

California Republican Rep. Jeff Denham added that he expects to see a broader "Western states" water package arise this year, perhaps with the California measures wrapped inside. The fact that Republicans now control both House and Senate, Denham added, "will strengthen our hand" in negotiating and moving a bill.

Still, as ranking Democrat on the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, and with the Senate's byzantine parliamentary rules at her disposal, Boxer retains some clout.

"I'm good at street fights," Boxer said. "I grew up in Brooklyn."

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