

## New California water legislation could be on tap

By Michael  
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Rep. Jim Costa of Fresno was by President Barack Obama's side when Obama came to the Valley last February to talk about California water issues. Costa is one of the few Democrats who's sided with Republicans on California water legislation efforts. Friday, Costa suggested California water legislation might move in several pieces this year.

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WASHINGTON — California water legislation is starting to trickle across Capitol Hill.

One newly introduced bill would speed approval of Sites Reservoir in the Sacramento Valley. Another would help restore San Francisco Bay habitat. More targeted bills are coming.

But a broader bill, promised weeks ago, hasn't gained visible attraction.

"I feel like that pop song, 'Call Me Maybe,'" said Rep. Jared Huffman, D-San Rafael.

One month ago, Huffman and six other House Democrats met privately with Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein to discuss water legislation. The meeting was a bit of a do-over, as the Northern Californians had resisted Feinstein's efforts last year to cut a deal primarily with House Republicans.

The House Democrats left the Jan. 27 meeting in Feinstein's office flashing thumbs-up about a new cooperative spirit, while keeping mum about all relevant details.

Since then, Huffman said this week after meeting on Capitol Hill with [Association of California Water Agency](#) members, he has not received any further contacts about writing a broad California water bill.

"We're ready," Huffman said, sounding vexed.

But one of the few Democrats who's sided with Republicans on California water efforts, Rep. Jim Costa of Fresno, said Friday that "we're working on legislation and meeting with different groups." He indicated the final product will eventually be shared with Northern California lawmakers.

"I'm sure they'll have a chance to see the language," Costa said, "though I'm not sure they'll support it."

Costa suggested California water legislation might move in several pieces this year. Already, on Feb. 26, Northern California Reps. John Garamendi, D-Walnut Grove, and Doug LaMalfa, R-Oroville, introduced a bill in support of [Sites Reservoir](#), a 1.8 million-acre storage project proposed for Glenn and Colusa counties.

Costa indicated that, in coming weeks, another bill could be introduced boosting "operational flexibility" for federal water projects in California. This could increase water deliveries to farms and environmentalists might not like it. Following that, Costa said, other water projects might be pushed.

Last year, proponents of major California water legislation insisted speed was essential, and they sailed forth with big, catch-all vessels.

The first House bill last year, dubbed the Sacramento-San Joaquin Valley Emergency Water Deliver Act, raced directly to the House floor a week after it was introduced. The second effort, dubbed the California Emergency Drought Relief Act, was similarly pushed through the House a week after its introduction. Neither bill went through the standard committee review process.

"The bill just burbled up," Rep. Peter DeFazio of Oregon, the senior Democrat on the House Committee on Natural Resources, complained last December.

Then the bill died in the face of opposition from the Obama administration, California Gov. Jerry Brown, Democratic Sen. Barbara Boxer and lawmakers who represent the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

The Republican-controlled House still remains ready this year to "move quickly," according to Rep. David Valadao, R-Hanford, the lead author of last year's major bills. With Republican Rep. Kevin McCarthy of Bakersfield serving as majority leader, getting California water legislation back for another House vote will still be a snap.

The Senate is one big question mark, though it's not the only one.

A potential scenario is for a larger Western states water package to arise from the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee. California-specific language, potentially covering anything from water delivery changes to dam authorizations, might then be attached.

"We have to see what the Senate tell us us has to be different," Valadao said. "We'll work with whoever is necessary."

The Obama administration's role is another question. Last year, House Republicans complained the administration reacted slowly; perhaps, some thought, in search of tactical advantage. Democratic Sen. Barbara Boxer's role will also be key, and possibly an evolving one now that she has announced she will retire after 2016.

"I hope they can keep on track to do a bipartisan bill," said Tim Quinn, executive director of the Association of California Water Agencies.

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