

California Assembly sends drought relief package to Jerry Brown

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Over the protests of Republicans who said the measure unnecessarily extends the government's reach over water policy, the California Assembly on Thursday sent Gov. Jerry Brown a \$1.1 billion drought relief package.

Elected officials are under pressure to act as California's drought stretches into a fourth year. The drought package largely allocates existing bond funds, including \$660 million for flood control and \$267 million for water reuse projects, while also claiming \$74.7 million from the general fund for areas like aiding fish and wildlife and giving food relief to workers displaced by the drought.

"This bill obviously will not solve the drought, but it is an important first step," said Assemblywoman Shirley Weber, D-San Diego.

No one disputed the need to address the drought. But Republicans rose to denounce language authorizing a fine of up to \$8,000 on people who illegally dam or divert rivers and streams, which Democratic supporters heralded as a weapon for cracking down on marijuana growers who flaunt environmental rules. Opponents said the measure would give government authorities sweeping powers and block landowners or water rights holders from appealing penalties. It passed 50-27.

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"It's a very broad and sweeping, expansive authority granted to the Department of Fish and Wildlife," said Assemblyman James Gallagher, R-Yuba City. "The problem with granting Fish and Wildlife these powers is they're not going to just use them against marijuana growers. They're going to use them against people who have water rights and people who have an existing right to divert water."

Republicans also said the package showed the need to ensure swift allocation of funds from the water bond voters passed in November, noting that the drought package's flood money flowed from a bond passed nearly a decade ago. GOP lawmakers proposed ways to expedite new water storage projects like streamlining environmental reviews.

"We have to move beyond exploring and studying, and studying, and studying – we have to start building these projects that are going to increase supply and get it to the communities who so desperately need it," said Assembly Republican Leader Kristin Olsen, R-Riverbank. "We can't wait eight years before starting to expedite the use of those funds," she added. "We have to do it now."

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