

Senate approves California drought relief bill amid Republican complaints

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Responding to a drought that shows no sign of abating as it enters a fourth year, the California State Senate on Wednesday advanced a \$1.1 billion relief package that mostly allocates previously approved funds.

“There’s something in this for every community that has a dramatic need about drought, and that’s all of us,” said Sen. Lois Wolk, D-Davis.

Senators approved Assembly bills 91 and 92 on votes of 35-1 and 24-14, respectively, after Republicans deliberated in a lengthy caucus meeting and then castigated the bill for broadening government powers over water. The Assembly expects to take up the measures Thursday, after which the package would go to Gov. Jerry Brown if passed.

Legislative leaders and the governor unveiled the package last week amid indications the drought will parch California for the foreseeable future. Water officials had already acted with the [unprecedented decision to compel every water agency](#) in California to limit people watering their yards.

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The legislation includes \$24 million in food aid for workers idled by the drought, particularly farm laborers, as well as a \$19.9 million for drinking water. The package’s \$272.7 million from [a just-passed water bond](#) for projects related to drinking water quality, water recycling and desalination could take longer to become reality. Most of the package, some \$660 million, would go to flood prevention, with that money stemming from a bond measure approved in 2006.

One of the two bills also toughens water enforcement, authorizing penalties of up to \$8,000 on people who illegally obstruct the ability of fish to move through rivers and streams, such as by building dams or diverting water. It would create a new office within the State Water Resources Control Board tasked with encouraging wastewater treatment projects and finding more potable water.

Republicans objected to those expanded powers.

“Every time we do one of these emergency bills,” said Sen. Tom Berryhill, R-Twain Harte, “what we really do is expand the authority of government.”

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