

Bill in Congress sets deadlines for California water studies

By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

A House panel passed legislation Wednesday designed to speed up the federal government's study of five major water-storage projects in California.

Government agencies have been studying the projects for nearly two decades. Meanwhile, the state's water problems have only grown worse.

The amendment, part of a larger spending bill for the agencies overseeing energy and the environment, sets hard deadlines for each of the feasibility studies to be completed, with the last by 2017. It is aimed at ensuring the projects can compete for \$2.7 billion in water-storage funding that voters approved last November.

The legislation from Republican Rep. David Valadao of Hanford calls for the Bureau of Reclamation to complete studies on expanding three dams and creating two others.

Feasibility studies on expanding Shasta Dam, the state's largest reservoir, and building a new dam on the San Joaquin River called Temperance Flat would need to be completed by the end of 2015, while studies about expanding the Los Vaqueros Dam in the eastern San Francisco Bay Area and building the Sites Dam north of Sacramento would be completed by the end of 2016.

A review of the proposed expansion of the San Luis Reservoir in the Central California would have to be completed by the end of 2017.

The full House is expected to take up the bill next week. Valadao's amendment is the first concerted effort from House Republicans during this Congress to respond to the state's water crisis. Efforts in past sessions to bring more water to farms by rolling back environmental protections failed to advance after getting through the House.

House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy of Bakersfield said the water-storage projects, if completed, could bring in almost the same amount of water as Gov. Jerry Brown's recent order requiring mandatory water rationing.

"The failure to capture and store water during times of rain and snow has left our communities in a state of crisis," McCarthy said. "David's amendment holds the government accountable and demands answers to projects that have been in limbo for years."

Doug Obegi, an attorney with the Natural Resources Defense Council, said his group is eager to see the results of the studies as well, but he said rushing them could lead to flawed analysis.

"I understand the desire to get the studies done," Obegi said. "We want to make sure the studies are done well."

A spokesman at the Bureau of Reclamation, Wilbert Louis Moore, said the agency is on track to complete feasibility studies for enlarging Shasta and constructing Temperance Flat Dam this year, pending the completion of reviews by the Office of Management and Budget. It's also on track with a feasibility report for the San Luis dam that is scheduled to be provided to the Office of Management and Budget in December 2017.

However, federal funding is not available for the agency to complete the feasibility studies and reports necessary to expand Los Vaqueros or build the Sites Dam. "As a result, there is no current completion schedule for these two feasibility studies," Moore said.

