

# House Democrats float new California water bill

By Michael Doyle Bee Washington  
Bureau

California water bills continue to fill the Capitol Hill hopper, and now one comes with a new twist.

It's crowd-sourcing drought solutions, in a long-shot bid to break a congressional stalemate.

On Wednesday, House Democrats from Northern California who have complained about being shut out of drought negotiations took matters into their own hands. They unveiled a sprawling proposal and, in a pointed gesture, opened it for public suggestions before it's formally introduced.

"This is what a good serious congressional response to the drought looks like," Rep. Jared Huffman, D-San Rafael, said in an interview, stressing a need to "do no harm" and to avoid reigniting "the water wars."

Joined by other Northern California Democrats, including Stockton-area Rep. Jerry McNerney, Huffman made public a 140-page draft bill and invited the world to [weigh in through his website](#). The formal introduction will come later, tailored at least in part to public feedback.

"The only way you're going to do something big and meaningful for California water is to have a transparent process," Huffman said. "If nothing else, it puts pressure on my Republican colleagues to get serious."

The Democrats' proposal omits new water storage projects or changes that boost irrigation deliveries to San Joaquin Valley farms, which have anchored House Republican drought-fighting efforts. Instead, it includes an array of water recycling grants, watershed protection programs, groundwater cleanup assistance and desalination studies, among other efforts.

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Rep. Jared Huffman, D-San Rafael, on his proposed drought-relief legislation

It's not enough, some lawmakers believe, and the Huffman bill faces an uphill battle, at best, in the Republican-controlled Congress.

"There are some good ideas there," Rep. Jim Costa, D-Fresno, said in an interview, before adding that Huffman's proposed bill "does little to address the short and long-term water challenges for California agriculture and the people of the San Joaquin Valley, where the drought continues to have its most devastating effects."

Costa is one of the handful of House Democrats more allied with California's Republican lawmakers in the crafting of water legislation. Some of their efforts have already been introduced, and more are on the way.

On Tuesday, for instance, Rep. David Valadao, R-Hanford, won House Appropriations Committee approval of an amendment directing the [Fish and Wildlife Service](#) to complete a five-year study on the status of the [protected Delta smelt](#). Farmers blame the smelt's protections under the [Endangered Species Act](#) for reductions in irrigation water deliveries.

"My constituents are suffering; our entire state is suffering," Valadao said in a statement. "We cannot continue to prioritize the hypothetical needs of a small bait fish over the needs of people."

On a broader front, Valadao, Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Tulare, and other House Republicans representing San Joaquin Valley and Sacramento Valley districts are quietly drafting a water package that follows up on a failed legislative effort

last Congress. In doing so, they face tactical decisions on how far to go; for instance, whether to repeat past proposals to end an ambitious San Joaquin River restoration program.

The farther the House goes, the more likely it is to run into resistance from Democratic Sen. Barbara Boxer.

“My guiding star is no water wars,” Boxer told reporters several weeks ago. “It’s counterproductive. It leads to the courthouse door. It’s unfair, it doesn’t move us forward and it hurts some people at the expense of other people. And it hasn’t worked.”

Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein, whose past negotiations with House Republicans worried environmentalists, continues to plug away at legislation, but has not set a time for when something might be introduced, according to her staff.

“I agree with Congressman Huffman that we need a drought bill that benefits different parts of the state, which is why I have met with him to discuss his bill and hope to include some of his ideas in the bill I’m developing,” Feinstein said in a statement Wednesday.

The chairwoman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, Republican Sen. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, has stressed her intention to move a Western states drought bill that goes beyond California.

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