

Obama turns up dial on California drought aid

By Michael Doyle Bee Washington
Bureau

The Obama administration is boosting its support for drought-stricken California, escalating a relief effort that congressional Republicans still consider misdirected and insufficient.

In a splashy announcement Wednesday, two leading administration officials unveiled a fresh federal package that totals nearly \$150 million over the next two years.

“There’s a lot of needs,” Deputy Interior Secretary Mike Connor told reporters.

[Most of the new money](#), \$130 million, will support tree-thinning, watershed restoration, streambed improvements and other work in what the administration calls the “Sierra Cascade California Headwaters.” An additional \$13.6 million will aid ranchers, and \$6 million will provide grants to rural communities.

The new support follows the administration’s July 12 delivery of more than \$110 million in grants and other forms of assistance for farmworkers, rural communities and others suffering amidst the state’s [fourth consecutive drought year](#). Both were rolled out for maximum impact.

President Barack Obama preceded the earlier announcement of drought aid with an unusual, hour-long teleconference with seven Western state governors. The [White House Council on Environmental Quality](#) helped pull together the latest aid presentation, which included Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack and California Secretary for Natural Resources John Laird.

“Producers want to know someone is paying attention,” Vilsack said. “They like the notion that resources are being directed at specific needs.”

The administration’s most recent pledges of assistance, though, do not address endangered species protection, irrigation water deliveries or other fundamental policies that farmers in the Central Valley consider most troublesome.

We have a two-and-a-half million acre-foot shortfall; do (they) have a plan to fix it?

Rep. Devin Nunes, expressing frustration with the Obama administration’s drought aid

“Here’s the problem,” [Rep. Devin Nunes](#), R-Tulare, said in an interview Wednesday. “We have a two-and-a-half million acre-foot shortfall; do (they) have a plan to fix it?”

A [California Department of Food and Agriculture study](#) this year found that the drought has shrunk the state’s surface water supplies by 8.7 million acre-feet, and that only 6.2 million acre-feet has been made up through increased groundwater pumping. The net loss of 2.5 million acre-feet has forced farmers to fallow an estimated half-a-million acres.

Legislation being drafted by House Republicans could confront these fundamental environmental policies, including operations of the vast federal water storage and delivery system. But six months into the 114th Congress, the GOP California water bill has still not been introduced yet.

Nunes said the legislation could be introduced within a few days, with the goal of passing it through the House next month. He said it’s likely to include water storage provisions and to call for repeal of the ambitious San Joaquin River restoration plan, among other elements.

“We really are at Armageddon now,” Nunes said. “We’re at the end of our rope ... the whole state is out of water.”

8.7 million Amount of surface water (in acre-feet) that the drought has shrunk the state’s supplies

Northern California Democrats, [led by Rep. Jared Huffman](#), D-San Rafael, are currently floating a [140-page draft package](#) for which they are now soliciting public feedback. It includes water recycling grants, watershed protection programs, groundwater cleanup assistance and desalination studies, among other efforts.

In the Republican-controlled House, the Democratic bill will likely sink quickly, though its ideas could still help shape whatever comes out of the Senate, where the fate of any water legislation will be decided.

“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,” Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein said in a statement last week.

Michael Doyle: mdoyle@mcclatchydc.com, [@MichaelDoyle10](#)