

House Republicans revive California water wish list

By Michael Doyle Bee Washington
Bureau

House Republicans are swinging for the fences with an ambitious new, but familiar, California water bill introduced Thursday.

After whiffing last Congress when Democrats controlled the Senate, GOP lawmakers are hoping the political climate is more congenial for [their 170-page package](#) that once again includes hot-button items like scaling back a San Joaquin River restoration program.

“Congress cannot make it rain,” said Rep. David Valadao, R-Hanford, the bill’s chief author, “but we can enact policies that expand our water infrastructure, allow for more water conveyance, and utilize legitimate science to ensure a reliable water supply for farmers and families.”

The legislation speeds studies for water storage projects, including proposals for building a new reservoir at Temperance Flat on the Upper San Joaquin River and raising Shasta Dam. It authorizes some increased water pumping to San Joaquin Valley farms, and replaces a San Joaquin River salmon-and-habitat restoration plan with a less-ambitious plan for warm-water fish.

In one new twist, the bill directs the Interior Department to negotiate a transfer of ownership of the New Melones Unit of the Central Valley Project to local water and power agencies. The unit includes New Melones Dam and reservoir on the Stanislaus River.

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Dubbed the Western Water and American Food Security Act, the package also invites broader appeal beyond California with provisions directed at other states.

“The tragedy of the current drought is no longer isolated to California’s Central Valley,” said House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy of Bakersfield, whose office has played a crucial role in drafting the package.

The bill co-sponsored by every California House Republican is all-but certain to pass the GOP-controlled House next month, much like its predecessor legislation that passed the House last year on a nearly party line vote.

Opposed by [the Obama administration](#) and Gov. Jerry Brown’s administration, [last year’s House package](#) effectively died in the Senate after House negotiators came relatively close but failed to complete a deal with Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein.

Renewing the theme of cross-Capitol impatience, Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Tulare, on Thursday said he wanted “the Senate to finally begin supporting the House’s consistent efforts to roll back the disastrous government regulations that prioritize fish over families.”

But the new House bill, introduced nearly seven months into the new Congress, includes controversial elements certain to once again draw opposition, raising questions about the legislation’s long-term prospects.

“We don’t want provisions that result in increased conflict among the parties, or undermine collaborative efforts,” Deputy Interior Secretary Mike Connor said while visiting California this week.

John Laird, secretary of the [California Natural Resources Agency](#), added that “we’re really looking for people to cooperate.” He noted that his [agency still stands by the position stated last year](#), when California officials declared “this is no time to reignite water wars, move water policy back into the courts, and try to pit one part of the state against another.”

House Republicans counter that the House and Senate should simply pass their respective bills, and then work out differences in a negotiating conference.

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House Republicans hoping for an aggressive water bill must bank on attracting at least six Senate Democrats, if they are to reach the 60 votes needed to overcome a filibuster. Feinstein, who has been working on new legislation as well, will be one key gatekeeper.

On Thursday, Feinstein said the House bill “includes some useful provisions to increase the flexibility of water delivery as well as some provisions that would violate environmental law, which I’ve said many times I cannot support.” She added that she will “continue to work with all sides to come up with workable solutions.”

Another key gatekeeper will be Sen. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, the Republican chair of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee who says she wants a broad bill covering all Western states.

Feinstein’s Democratic colleague, Sen. Barbara Boxer, is a potential wild card. The question may not be so much whether the staunch environmentalist will oppose a bill sought by the House Republicans, but how vehemently.

On Thursday, Boxer sounded firm.

“It’s unfortunate that House Republicans, with much fanfare, are rolling out a bill that is the same-old, same-old and will only reignite the water wars,” Boxer said in a statement. “Communities across California are hurting because of this historic drought, so we need solutions that will benefit all our state’s water users.”

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