

House GOP's California water bill still a long way from port

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Four years into California's latest devastating drought, the Republican-controlled House of Representatives on Thursday will pass another catch-all water bill that's nowhere near done.

Facing a presidential veto threat, some skeptical senators and a sharply divided state, the [170-page bill](#) remains a work in progress. Its approval Thursday, mostly along party lines, will effectively set a GOP negotiating stance for future haggling.

"All we're asking for in this piece of legislation is some common sense," Rep. David Valadao, R-Calif., said during House debate that began Wednesday. "We've got zero water and we've got high unemployment numbers. We've got people standing in lines, asking for food and begging for help."

Valadao, chief author of the Western Water and American Food Security Act, in part packaged together water-related requests from Republican lawmakers. He represents a San Joaquin Valley district hit hard by the drought.

My bill is a balanced approach that would actually increase water delivery to the Western regions most in need. Rep. David Valadao, R-Calif.

His [bill would repeal](#) an ambitious San Joaquin River salmon-and-habitat restoration program, and replace it with something smaller. It directs the sale of the New Melones Dam on the Stanislaus River to local water districts. It adds artificially spawned salmon or smelt when counting Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta fish populations under the [Endangered Species Act](#).

The bill pushes completion of studies of five potential water storage projects, including construction of a new dam on the Upper San Joaquin River, and it penalizes the Bureau of Reclamation \$20,000 a day for missed study deadlines. It steers more water to farms south of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.

"We've continued to dump water out to the ocean over the past four years," said Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Calif. "The reason we don't have water is not because of drought. It's because we didn't hold the water when we had a chance to hold the water."

Another San Joaquin Valley lawmaker, Rep. Jeff Denham, R-Calif., added that "communities are just being shut out from water."

But a Los Angeles-area Democrat, Rep. Janice Hahn, countered that the bill "just moves water from one need to another," while other Democrats were equally critical of a bill they said they had no hand in drafting.

"It sets California back, by fanning the flames of centuries-old water wars," said Rep. Doris Matsui, Calif., adding that "the bill only further divides the state."

A crucial procedural vote Wednesday set the stage for the full debate and passage of the California water bill Thursday. With Republicans enjoying a 246-188 advantage in the House, its initial passage is assured.

Valadao and his allies, notably including House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy of Bakersfield, Calif., introduced their bill on June 25 and sped it to the House floor without an oversight hearing. The six-month wait for the bill since the start of the new Congress resulted from GOP hopes that Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein of California could wrap up her own version acceptable to myriad California constituencies.

So far, though, the Senate work has not borne fruit, and Feinstein's colleague, Democratic Sen. Barbara Boxer, sharply criticized the House bill as a "same-old, same-old" effort that will "reignite the water wars."

It fails to address critical elements of California's complex water challenges and will, if enacted, impede an effective and timely response to the continuing drought, while providing no additional water to hard-hit communities. White House Office of Management and Budget

The Obama administration [stated this week that](#) it "strongly opposes" the House bill. Threatening a veto, the administration said the bill creates "new and confusing conflicts with existing laws" and would "generate significant litigation," among other problems.

The bill would have the effect of "preempting the ability of the State of California to enforce its own water management and wildlife preservation laws," according to the Congressional Budget Office.

The House leadership blocked a number of amendments from California Democrats, though several were permitted, including one by Rep. Jim Costa, to require annual reports on federal water releases. Another, by Rep. John Garamendi, would help installation of a fish screen at the Delta Cross Channel Gates to protect migrating salmon.

The House Republicans, joined by a few Democrats, including Costa, are now banking on the Senate passing something so that negotiators can start a conference committee. There, the thinking goes, a final deal might be crafted and folded into a broad Western states package that can develop more political momentum.

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