

Feinstein-Boxer water bill offers some hope

By the Editorial
Board

For all the pain this miserable drought has caused, perhaps some good could come of it.

Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer [have introduced the Democrats' most refined legislation](#) yet to help shape California's water future.

Although Republicans who control Congress will have their say, the [Feinstein-Boxer 147-page opus](#) includes plenty to embrace, not the least of which is that it offers \$1.3 billion for California's water system, an important though modest sum in this large and thirsty state.

Environmentalists and others, including The Sacramento Bee's editorial board, [chastised Feinstein last year when she worked with Republicans](#) on legislation that would have skewed toward southern San Joaquin Valley farm interests at the expense of this end of the Valley.

This time, California's senior senator deserves praise, as does Boxer. Feinstein consulted with Gov. Jerry Brown's water experts and some environmentalists, less so with House Republicans who are pursuing their own flawed legislation.

The senators' measure takes no position on [Brown's \\$15 billion twin tunnel concept](#) to move water around the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. But their legislation seeks to track with the governor's water plan, and [the \\$7.5 billion bond approved by voters](#) last November.

The bill, called the California Emergency Drought Relief Act, would provide money to encourage desalination plants, water recycling and groundwater storage.

It would provide some money for reservoirs, perhaps including raising Shasta Dam, expanding Los Vaqueros Reservoir in Contra Costa County, and building the proposed Sites Reservoir in Colusa County or Temperance Flat outside Fresno.

The bill would earmark money to help restore fisheries by increasing spawning habitat and water flows in the Sacramento and San Joaquin river basins.

Rep. Doris Matsui, D-Sacramento, said the measure contains provisions that "could provide real drought relief." Rep. John Garamendi, a Democrat who represents much of the Delta and opposes the twin tunnels, told an editorial board member that the Feinstein-Boxer bill "sets the right tone."

The bill faces many obstacles. It could get wrapped up into broader water legislation covering the Western states. That could be perilous.

House Republicans, including Reps. David Valadao, R-Hanford, and Devin Nunes, R-Tulare, propose to ensure that agricultural interests receive water, but that would weaken the Endangered Species Act. That's unacceptable.

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Farmers should get their fair allocation of water. So should the environment. The notion that the Delta must suffer further assault is unacceptable. To the contrary, it must be saved.

Farm interests [issued statements generally praising the effort](#), while Valadao slapped at the Democrats' measure, saying in a press release that it will do "little to actually deliver more water to California farmers and families."

Valadao and other Republicans surely see that President Barack Obama won't sign legislation that weakens one of the signature environmental laws of the 20th century. If Central Valley Republicans hope to help their districts, they must work with Feinstein, Boxer and other Democrats.

The Feinstein-Boxer bill runs roughly 25,000 words, with some nuances that need to be cleared up.

There is, for example, a line that could be read as siding with [East San Joaquin Valley growers who sued the state last October](#), claiming the state illegally denied water to landowners who have senior water rights. Feinstein's aides say it won't. There's also a concern that a part of the bill could undermine California's version of the Endangered Species Act.

Though each issue could become significant, the bigger takeaway is that California's Democratic senators have jumped into the deep end. Republicans should join into the discussion, for the betterment of the state.