

# Leadership gap hinders federal drought plan

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The federal response to the Western drought has been hindered by high-level vacancies, bureaucratic caution and political calculations that have thrown sand in the gears.

Put another way: With [more than 70 percent](#) of California now classified in a state of “exceptional” or “extreme” drought, Uncle Sam is floundering.

“We need leadership from the federal government,” pleaded Cannon Michael, a politically engaged farmer from Los Banos in California’s acutely dry San Joaquin Valley.

But so far, dynamic federal leadership has been lacking. Some of that is inevitable. Western water use poses too many inherent conflicts to unify all factions. Some people refuse to be led, and the drought is, at bottom, a state matter. Certain federal shortcomings, though, seem like self-inflicted wounds. Consider:

Somebody at the White House has to speak out. I haven’t heard any national strategy to assist California and the West with the drought. Dan Beard, former Bureau of Reclamation commissioner

– The Obama administration lacks confirmed leaders in key positions. Four top water-related jobs at the Interior Department, the Environmental Protection Agency and the White House Council on Environmental Quality have remained vacant for months, at least in part because of resistance from Senate Republicans.

– Lawmakers remain mired in partisanship and power plays. The Republican-controlled House of Representatives has passed three California water bills, each crafted by the GOP with minimal Democratic input. Republicans counter that Democrats won’t support anything that provides real relief.

– President Barack Obama has not used his bully pulpit to persistently drive a Western water agenda. He has visited California 28 times during his presidency, but his lone trip to the state’s San Joaquin Valley, ground zero for the drought, occurred 18 months ago.

“I think the Obama administration is missing a golden opportunity to provide leadership,” Dan Beard, a Democrat and former Bureau of Reclamation commissioner, said in an interview. “So far, we’ve had nothing but radio silence from them on the drought.”

542,000 Acres of California farmland idled because of drought.

Some definite efforts are underway.

In Deputy Interior [Secretary Michael L. Connor](#), a former [Bureau of Reclamation](#) commissioner, the administration deploys an expert who understands the issues. Regional and field-level civil servants also get high marks from Westerners who work with them closely.

“We’re getting better,” Connor said earlier this year. “We’re making changes.”

Connor himself has been spending more time in California, prompting state Secretary for Natural Resources John Laird to quip recently that the federal official had become a “de facto resident” of the state.

The Obama administration also has been rolling out aid. In June, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack joined Connor in announcing a \$150 million package aimed in part at conserving California watersheds. Earlier, the White House

announced a \$110 million package targeting Western farmers, workers and rural communities.

“Interior has had a very robust and aggressive response to the drought with respect to California’s Bay-Delta, the Colorado River, and the Pacific Northwest,” Connor said in a statement this week. “We’ve modified operations to squeeze out more water while complying with environmental laws. We’ve facilitated a large number of transfers and water-sharing arrangements.”

In Congress, Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein of California has enlisted colleagues to help [craft a comprehensive California water bill](#). Her legislation introduced in late July won at least partial praise across the board.

But for all that, the federal effort seems fractured and, at times, inert.

Waiting for the Senate to act first, House Republicans didn’t introduce their major California water bill until six months into the current Congress. It was a tactical decision that did not pan out. The House didn’t hold committee hearings on the California water bill, which bred resentment that could have been avoided.

[The White House’s web page](#) touting “An Administration Wide Response to the Drought” offers as its primary “fact sheet” a document [dated Aug. 7, 2012](#). The White House drought page’s most recent related blog post dates to Feb. 15, 2014, following Obama’s sole visit to the San Joaquin Valley.

While Obama received [a White House drought and wildfire briefing June 12](#), the focus seemed to be on counting the dollars the administration was sending west. Cabinet secretaries seem to deliver emergency aid more than they promote longer-term policies or confront competing ideas, save for discussions about climate change.

Job openings can linger. Nine months passed between Obama’s selection of Estevan López as Connor’s replacement to head the Bureau of Reclamation and his Senate confirmation last December.

The administration’s acting officeholders, meanwhile, lack the clout provided by Senate confirmation. Somewhere between the White House and Congress, key nominations bog down.

In aggressive hands, for instance, Council on Environmental Quality chiefs can forge compromises, ease intra-agency disputes and sustain focus. In the Clinton administration, CEQ chair Kathleen McGinty helped design Pacific Northwest forest policy.

But in the 18 months since Nancy Sutley’s departure as chair of Obama’s Council on Environmental Quality, the White House has not submitted a nomination to fill the seat left open in February 2014. Instead, two acting chairs have filled in.

[The CEQ Blog](#), showcasing the office’s priorities, has posted about 20 items since January, dealing with topics from wind power to National Bike to Work Day. None deal directly with the Western drought.

The EPA’s top water position is also vacant. Obama nominated Ken Kopocis to be assistant EPA administrator for the Office of Water in 2011. Kopocis’ extensive experience includes past work on California’s Bay-Delta region, a key piece in the state’s water puzzle.

His nomination languished, prompting Obama to renominate Kopocis in 2013. Republicans unhappy with Obama for various reasons continue to block him.

“The (Interior) Department has very good people in acting positions and very good nominees who deserve confirmation,” Connor said. “We also have a number of confirmed leaders who are leading our drought response efforts.”

Two crucial Interior Department positions are the assistant secretary for water and science and the assistant secretary for fish, wildlife and parks. The former oversees the Bureau of Reclamation, which operates water and power projects

in 17 Western states. It hasn't had a confirmed leader since last October.

The latter oversees the Fish and Wildlife Service, which requires water for vulnerable species, and hasn't had a confirmed leader since August 2014.

The regional operations are intensely engaged with the California drought. At the national level, on the policy side, it seems to be insufficient. Rep. John Garamendi, D-Calif.

"I don't know whether they are afraid to come up with initiatives, or they just don't know what to do," Beard, the former reclamation commissioner, said of the administration, "but whatever the reason, they just haven't done anything."

In response, administration officials point to activities like the establishment in November 2013 of the [National Drought Resilience Partnership](#), a multiagency effort that includes an Internet-based [drought information portal](#).

"There's more to do, and we intend to build on actions taken the last couple of years," Connor said.

Some leadership complications, moreover, are baked into California's geography. The resource competition between cities and farms, or between the Sacramento Valley in the north and the San Joaquin Valley in the south, makes political conflict inevitable. Unity is hard.

Still, on Capitol Hill, consistent leadership is elusive.

The Republican-controlled House of Representatives has pushed the hardest for California drought action. It passed two far-reaching bills last year that failed in the Senate, and a similar package this Congress.

Like similar legislation in the last Congress, (the House drought bill) was developed with little input from the public, the administration, or key stakeholders affected by the drought. White House Office of Management and Budget

House Republican efforts have kept the issue afloat, but they have also weighted themselves down with partisan anchors. Democratic Sen. Barbara Boxer of California said House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy, a Republican from Bakersfield, would not meet if she insisted on having House Democrats present. McCarthy's side counters that Boxer blew up a potential deal last Congress.

"Continually, the Republicans have offered solutions, and continually, nearly all the Democrats have voted no," said Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Calif.

Some House Republicans seem content with this partisan divide, with the National Republican Congressional Committee exuberantly attacking the "vulnerable" California Democrats who voted against the water bill last month.

House Speaker John Boehner's characterizations, as in [a July 14 Facebook post](#) about "President Obama's man-made water shortage in the West," have also emphasized partisanship. The constant fighting and lack of state unity, lawmakers concede, may have made everyone gun shy.

"You've (had) four years of knockdown, drag-out fights in Congress that have achieved nothing but bloody noses," said Rep. John Garamendi, D-Calif., "and that's very debilitating."

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