

Senators drill into California water bill

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Ever hopeful lawmakers on Thursday conjured the vision of a compromise California water bill that succeeds instead of fails.

It may be a mirage.

But in a long-awaited hearing, the chairwoman of a key Senate committee zeroed in on some specific, concrete details that could be the basis for real-world legislation. Water storage, recycling and desalination projects could be the foundation for a deal, some believe.

“We’ve got some things we can be building on,” said Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska. “Clearly, we’ve got some real differences. The way we’re going to work this out is to work together.”

Chair of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, Murkowski convened the two-hour hearing Thursday primarily to consider significantly different House and Senate versions of California water legislation. The morning hearing was the first to be held specifically on the bills.

Murkowski’s emphasis on a pragmatic approach, and the civil working relationship she demonstrated throughout the hearing with her committee’s senior Democrat, Sen. Maria Cantwell of Washington, cheered some in the crowded third-floor hearing room.

At the same time, the enduring differences and myriad legislative hurdles ahead were on display as well. Significantly, these include the cost of a water bill and finding ways to pay for it.

“It’s very difficult to get consensus in California water on anything that’s meaningful,” acknowledged Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif.

Perhaps underscoring the big gaps remaining, Feinstein and Democratic Sen. Barbara Boxer departed after delivering their statements and missed the testimony of Rep. David Valadao, R-Calif., the author of the House bill. Valadao, in turn, made a point of inviting both of the absent senators to visit the drought-stricken San Joaquin Valley.

“Unfortunately,” said Dan Keppen, executive director of the Family Farm Alliance, “two separate bills are of absolutely no value to a parched West.”

Introduced in late July by Feinstein and Boxer, the 147-page Senate bill is the political dance partner to a [170-page bill approved](#) July 16 by the House of Representatives along largely party lines.

The Senate bill authorizes partial funding for new water storage projects, including Sites Reservoir proposed for the Sacramento Valley and Temperance Flat proposed for the Upper San Joaquin River. It funds water recycling and desalination projects and potentially eases the delivery of more water to San Joaquin Valley farms.

We think the differences are surmountable with actual interest in finding a resolution. Sarah Woolf, a director of the Westlands Water District

Some Senate language resembles what House Republicans wrote, such as expediting reviews of water transfers and mandating more regular monitoring of the threatened Delta smelt.

Unlike the House bill, though, the Senate package leaves the ambitious San Joaquin River restoration program intact.

The Senate bill ignores a House command to sell the New Melones Dam to local water districts. The House bill explicitly targets the [Endangered Species Act](#) more aggressively than the Senate bill.

Tellingly, the House bill would make permanent changes in law. The Senate bill is cast as a temporary measure.

Jeff Kightlinger, general manager of the politically potent Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, testified that his district supports the Senate bill but has taken no position on the House bill.

“We believe (the House bill) will slow decision-making, generate significant new litigation and limit the real-time operational flexibility that has proven critical to maximizing water delivery,” Deputy Interior Secretary Michael L. Connor told the Senate panel.

Murkowski has stressed that a California bill would only move as part of a larger package.

The contours of the broader package grew more apparent Thursday, with lawmakers touching briefly on two Alaska-related measures dealing with hydroelectric facilities, a New Mexico drought bill and, from far outside the West, a North Carolina hydroelectric project bill.

“The more senators that take an interest, the greater the chance of success,” noted Todd Neves, a third-generation farmer and a director of Westlands Water District, the giant water district that provides water to farms on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley.

Neves, fellow Westlands director Sarah Woolf, Woolf’s husband, Chris, and Johnny Amaral, the district’s deputy general manager for external affairs, spent the day before the hearing making the Capitol Hill rounds, testing the waters and answering questions in several House offices.

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