

Editorial: Feinstein-Boxer bill is a good start in addressing drought

By [the Sacramento Bee Editorial Board](#)

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With more than three-quarters of the state suffering extreme to exceptional drought, old, unhealthy disputes are resurfacing.

House Republicans, led by members from the southern [San Joaquin Valley](#), passed a bill last week that amounts to a water grab for the south Valley. Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer have introduced a more reasonable bill that can be debated and amended to meet the needs of the entire state.

The underlying issue is that making the semi-arid south Valley into an agricultural cornucopia required intensive irrigation fed by transfers of water through the [Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta](#). That system has been under stress for some time, but the drought has raised the stakes.

Some people continue to repeat the canard that water from the Delta that flows to the [Pacific Ocean](#) is wasted. These flows are essential to prevent saltwater intrusion. In the drought of 1931, Delta water became too salty to drink or to use for irrigation.

The Senate bill would not penalize people who saved water in good years for use in dry years. While the [Bureau of Reclamation](#) in a dry year can take that carryover water, it would send a bad message to farmers to use it or lose it, rather than to conserve. The bill allows contractors to have their carryover water.

The Feinstein-Boxer bill does not waive federal laws or pre-empt state law to transfer water south of the Delta, a relief. But the bill does have provisions that concern Northern California House members and that Feinstein and Boxer should work on.

For one, the bill would micromanage how the pumps in the Delta can be operated, locking in a specific inflow-export ratio for water transfers. It's better to allow experts at state and federal water and fish agencies make decisions based on current conditions. Congress should not tell the state and federal agencies how to operate Delta pumps.

Existing law provides flexibility and emergency programs in droughts.

What has been missing, as Rep. John Garamendi, D-Walnut Grove, notes, is money. The Feinstein-Boxer bill would earmark \$300 million. There would be money for conservation and efficiency measures, plus aid to low-income farmworkers harmed by the drought. Especially helpful would be money for technological tools to help farmers get through this year and for emergency projects to address drinking water problems.

Given the nonstarter House bill, the Senate might be better off working on the Feinstein-Boxer bill, adding provisions for other drought-stricken states in the West, then sending it over to the House without a call for a House-Senate conference committee, as was done with the debt limit. House members could vote up or down.

This drought year should launch real discussions about how California should adapt to water scarcity, without pitting one area of the state against others.

Read more here: <http://www.sacbee.com/2014/02/13/6152918/editorial-feinstein-boxer-bill.html#storylink=cpy>