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California water bill likely to pass U.S. House, then lose steam

By Michael Doyle
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Highlights

California Republicans unite behind 170-page water bill
Package resurrects ideas favored by San Joaquin Valley farmers
The big question mark for water bill resides with the Senate

An ambitious California water bill will pass a key U.S. House committee this week and soon will sail through the Republican-controlled House of Representatives on a near party-line vote.

Then it will crash into the U.S. Senate, where negotiators may or may not be able to craft a package acceptable to enough Democrats that it can become law.

It's a familiar Capitol Hill script, where the ultimate plot twist for California water legislation would be bipartisan compromise that leads to relevant, real-world success.

"I know we're never going to get 100 percent buy-in on this, but it's a good place to start the conversation," the House bill's lead author, Rep. David Valadao, R-Calif., said in an interview.

Co-sponsored by 25 House members, with Rep. Jim Costa of California the only Democrat, the legislation introduced June 25 resurrects ideas that passed the House last year over objections from the Obama administration and Northern California Democrats.



Rich Pedroncelli - AP
Gino Celli inspects wheat nearing harvest on his farm near Stockton, Calif., in this May 18, 2015 file photo. An ambitious California water bill will pass a key U.S. House committee this week and soon will sail through the Republican-controlled House of Representatives on a near party-line vote. Then it will crash into the U.S. Senate.

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This year's 170-page bill, for instance, repeals a San Joaquin River salmon-and-habitat restoration program, replacing it with something smaller. Between fiscal 2007 and fiscal 2014, the federal government committed about \$169 million to the river restoration program. More than \$860 million will be required over the next decade, the program estimates.

While it's expensive, the current river restoration program settled a lawsuit and was approved by a federal judge, so the attempted congressional repeal could get complicated.

The House bill also directs the Bureau of Reclamation to negotiate a transfer of the New Melones Dam on the Stanislaus River, the state's second-largest earth-filled dam, to local water districts. It steers more irrigation deliveries to San Joaquin Valley farms and speeds completion of five water storage project studies.

In some cases, it's an unabashed GOP wish list, packaging together requests presented by California's House Republicans. It has little, if anything, in common with a 140-page draft water bill floated by Democrats.

"I'm not going to negotiate from their position," Valadao said. "I'm going to negotiate from my position."

1,952. Wells identified as dry or critical by
California Office of Emergency Services

The House Natural Resources Committee has not held a hearing on the legislation, nor has it had an oversight hearing this Congress devoted to the California drought. On Wednesday, committee members will deliver opening statements. On Thursday, they will consider amendments and vote.

Beyond a shadow of a doubt, the committee will approve the measure. Republicans enjoy a 26-18 advantage over Democrats on the Western states-dominated panel. Some of California's leading advocates for the legislation, like Westlands Water District General Manager Tom Birmingham, are on Capitol Hill this week.

There is also no doubt the legislation will pass the House, where its leading patrons include Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy of Bakersfield and where Republicans command a 246-188 advantage. It's after that the serious doubts and potential deal-making will arise.

“It will be the same movie we’ve seen in the last few years,” Rep. Jared Huffman, a California Democrat who serves on the Natural Resources panel, predicted in an interview. “Most of this bill doesn’t have a great chance of becoming law.”

“There are fatal flaws in this bill. The bill is riddled with problems.”
Rep. Jared Huffman, D-Calif.

Huffman said the House GOP bill “puts the thumb on the scale for the San Joaquin Valley” in the redistribution of water, and further criticized Republicans for locking out Northern California Democrats in the bill’s drafting.

Costa, who expects to be the committee’s sole Democrat to support the bill Thursday, countered in an interview that his “hope is that it will be the basis for conversations” with Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein of California and that it will “continue to focus attention on the crisis, as a way to get a response from the Senate.”

Valadao agreed that “it falls a lot on Sen. Feinstein” to determine the water legislation’s ultimate fate. Practically speaking, House Republicans have written off hopes of winning over Feinstein’s California colleague, Democratic Sen. Barbara Boxer. Assuming no GOP defections, Republicans will need at least six Democratic senators to prevail.

The Obama administration has not yet formally weighed in, though it opposed last year’s similar legislation. Brown administration officials in California offer cautionary words, taking note of the \$7.5 billion California water bond that passed last fall.

“We welcome any efforts that match with federal assistance what the state voters overwhelmingly backed, so long as it does not weaken state and federal environmental protections, does not pre-empt state law and does not favor one region or economic sector of the state over another,” Nancy Vogel, deputy secretary of the California Natural Resources Agency, said in a statement.

Michael Doyle: 202-383-0006, mdoyle@mcclatchydc.com

<http://www.sacbee.com/news/state/california/water-and-drought/article26672701.html>