

WASHINGTON

Bipartisan bid to end state's water wars

Feinstein, Pombo back plan to finally unblock CALFED

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Washington -- Two traditional ideological foes, Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein and Republican Rep. Richard Pombo of Tracy, plan an unusual joint appeal today to their colleagues in Congress to put aside old arguments and finally pass legislation that proponents say would protect water quality in the bay and Delta and help make California "drought-proof."

The two Californians have been the driving forces behind long-stalled efforts to reauthorize the unique federal-state program called CALFED, which was created in 1995 to save the Northern California environment while supplying water to Central Valley growers and booming areas of Southern California.

Until now, the players in the state's ancient water wars have blocked the program from proceeding with new projects. But that logjam may be breaking, and through their joint statement to be released today, Feinstein and Pombo will show they want to keep the momentum going.

About the only remaining opposition to the program's renewal comes from Bay Area environmental groups that argue the proposal will endanger San Francisco Bay and Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta by sending hundreds of thousands of acre-feet of water to Southern California. The House version of the renewal, they say, also eases the way for construction of large and controversial water-storage projects such as increasing the height of the Shasta Dam or vastly expanding Los Vaqueros Reservoir in eastern Contra Costa County. Proponents of the bill dispute both of those claims.

The House Resources Committee, chaired by Pombo, on Wednesday passed a bill drafted by Rep. Ken Calvert, R-Riverside, to renew the water program. Calvert's bill has a few major differences with the Feinstein-written Senate version. Her bill was passed by the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee last week.

The differences will have to be reconciled before a bill can be sent to President Bush, whose administration has also called for the program's renewal.

"The Congress has wrestled with CALFED for a decade," Pombo will say in the statement he and Feinstein plan to release today. "The time has come to finish this process and provide certainty for the long-term water needs of California."

Feinstein will say she's optimistic that a final deal can be struck. "Though much work remains to be done, California is at long last on track to get a CALFED bill passed this year," according to an advance copy of the statement.

Calvert's bill, in effect, authorizes in advance the Shasta and Los Vaqueros projects and says that once the secretary of the interior or the heads of other federal water agencies grant final approval, Congress would have 120 days to block their action. "This provision would help CALFED storage and in no way undermines the regulatory process," Calvert told the committee Wednesday. He also pointed out that even if the projects won final authorization, they would still need a separate congressional appropriation before money would be available to build them.

Feinstein's bill authorizes continued study of the two big projects. It's widely speculated on Capitol Hill that the pre-authorization provision will be dropped from the bill's final version.

Both bills recognize that as part of the compromise between urban and rural interests -- and Northern and Southern California -- more water will have to move south. Feinstein and Calvert say they will accomplish that without damaging the health of the bay and Delta.

Timothy Quinn, vice president of state water project resources for the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, said planners envisioned about a 5 percent increase in the amount of water heading to the water-hungry south. That would be about 200,000 acre-feet more a year, said Quinn, whose agency supplies water to about 18 million people.

An acre-foot is enough water to cover an acre of land with a foot of water.

But Thomas Graff of Environmental Defense, a group spearheading opposition to both bills, said water planners actually wanted to shift 1 million acre-feet more a year, a figure he says he got from public statements of state, federal and local water agencies that cut their own agreement last year.

The Metropolitan Water District, which is dealing with drought conditions and a growing population across six counties, also has to deal with the loss of 800,000 acre-feet of water annually under the Colorado River compact that was negotiated with other Western states last year.

"Nothing in the bill supplies a number," Graff said. "He (Quinn) is trying to mollify the Bay Area to prevent it from mobilizing against the Metropolitan Water District from taking more water."

Calvert said opponents had mischaracterized his bill. "This is a way to create confidence on the part of taxpayers that we're looking to move water, maintain water quality and enhance the environment," he said.

"It helps make California drought-proof," he said, by spreading the north's water abundance toward the south and increasing water storage.

Feinstein built support for her bill by cutting the nominal price tag from \$880 million to \$389 million over six years. More federal money, however, can be separately approved for other projects.

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