

# Controversial Calif. water bill passes US House

Gosia Wozniacka, Associated Press, 3-1-12

The U.S. House of Representatives on Wednesday approved a controversial water bill that would block the restoration of the San Joaquin River and give California farmers and urban residents more water.

The bill was approved by a 246 to 175 margin on a largely partisan vote in the Republican-controlled House. The measure is expected to die in the Democrat-controlled Senate. President Barack Obama also has vowed to veto it.

Sponsored by Visalia Republican Devin Nunes, the legislation would repeal plans to restore the San Joaquin River and remove the \$300 million already authorized for the project. The bill overrides a settlement that ended nearly two decades of lawsuits to restore the river.

It would also pre-empt state water law and reduce the amount of water available for fish, wildlife and restoration efforts. It would redirect a greater supply from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta to farmers, lengthen irrigation contracts to 40 years and ease water transfers.

The bill reinstates a 1994 agreement known as the Bay-Delta Accord that was seen at the time as a compromise among environmentalists, farmers and local, state and national governments. But opponents say that compromise was reached before new science came to light and before delta fisheries collapsed.

Republicans lauded the bill, saying it would guarantee adequate water deliveries. Nunes, the bill's sponsor, said environmental regulations meant to protect fish took water away from farms and harmed the Central Valley's agriculture.

"This bill provides the ultimate protections," Nunes said, adding California would not need to build a new peripheral canal if the bill became law. "People in our nation's breadbasket are standing in food lines, and they're getting carrots that have been imported from China. Their sacrifices have done nothing to improve the environment. Fish populations have declined."

Most Democrats spent the day arguing against the bill—it passed with the vote of just 10 Democrats—saying it's disastrous for the delta estuary and would disrupt California's complex network of water-sharing agreements.

"It's a water grab," said Rep. John Garamendi, D-Walnut Grove. "This legislation... takes 800,000 acre feet away from the environment of the delta and delivers it to south-of-delta water contractors. This theft will have a profound and negative effect on the water for protection of species, for smelt and salmon."

California water officials and Gov. Jerry Brown also opposed the bill, as did officials from more than a dozen other states, from Oregon to Nevada to Texas. They said the bill would overturn states' water rights and determine who receives water within a state, a precedent that could threaten water agreements across the West.

Democratic Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer vowed to fight the bill in the Senate.

"Put simply, this bill is a recipe for disaster. It is slanted and dangerously short-sighted," Sen. Feinstein said in a statement. "It promises water deliveries to certain areas while neglecting to identify where that water will come from or how its diversion will affect other regions. It destroys any chance to achieve a balanced solution to Bay

Delta restoration and undermines state and local efforts to assure long-term water deliveries."