

Water Wars: Democrats block GOP bid to speed Shasta Dam enlargement

By Emily Cadei and Dale Kasler

ecadei@mcclatchydc.com

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WASHINGTON —

Democrats in Congress have stalled an attempt to jump start an expansion of Shasta Dam, California's largest reservoir and a major water source for the Central Valley.

Their objections blocked a Republican gambit to allow the \$1.3 billion project to move forward without full up-front funding and despite objections from Gov. Jerry Brown's administration.

A Democratic leadership aide in the House confirmed to the Sacramento Bee on Monday that House Democrats rejected a GOP proposal to speed preparations for the project, by eliminating a requirement on the amount of upfront funding needed for pre-construction.

Democrats also pressed to include language in the House spending bill that would ensure the federal Bureau of Reclamation follows all state and federal laws when it comes to the dam. State law currently bars the dam from being enlarged.

Officials have debated the idea of raising Shasta Dam for years. The effort hit a major roadblock in 2015 after a feasibility study by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation called for more non-federal funding for the project. The bureau declined to make a recommendation on how to move it forward.

Republicans in Washington, however, haven't given up on the project.

With the Trump administration in their corner, GOP lawmakers from California are making a renewed push to raise the height of the dam, which would increase storage in Shasta Lake by 634,000 acre-feet, or 14 percent.

Shasta Dam is the linchpin of the federal Central Valley Project (CVP), which brings water to agricultural and urban water agencies as far south as Kings County in the San Joaquin Valley. Increasing its storage capacity is a priority for the state's water-intensive agricultural interests.

Under the administration's proposal, the Shasta Dam enlargement requires a 50 percent non-federal share be paid upfront, prior to construction.

Brown's administration isn't inclined to provide that funding. It opposes raising the height of the dam citing environmental impacts as well as the risk of flooding sacred grounds belonging to the Winnemum Wintu Indian tribe.

That conflict prompted proponents of the dam enlargement to seek a workaround.

Last week, the Los Angeles Times reported that House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy of Bakersfield was working to slip a provision into the must-pass spending bill Congress is considering this week to eliminate the upfront funding requirement, allowing the dam enlargement project to begin pre-construction work without all the necessary non-federal funding lined up.

It's one of dozens of provisions various lawmakers have been trying to insert into the spending bill, which is needed to keep the government open after the current funding authorization expires on March 22. Lawmakers believe it could be one of the last pieces of legislation to advance this year, as members of Congress turn their focus to November's elections.

Republicans have majorities in both the House and the Senate, but they'll need Democratic votes to pass the spending bill. That gives Democrats leverage, particularly the Democratic House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi of San Francisco, who is a key player in the latest spending talks.

Democrats agreed to support \$20 million in funding for design and pre-construction work to raise the dam, which was sought by Republicans and recommended by Trump's Interior Department last month. State officials opposed even that move.

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