



The Politics of Why Congressional Democrats Scuttled Shasta Dam Expansion

Drew Phelps
March 20, 2018

As California's lakes and reservoirs brace for potentially massive amounts of rainfall, debates have raged in Congress over expanding the largest reservoir in the Golden State.

Leaders in Congress are rushing to pass an omnibus funding bill by the Friday deadline. If they fail, we will see a repeat of the February government shutdown.

Rider bills extend negotiations

Among the sticking points in the bill are the myriad riders attached to pursue specific policies or allocate funds to local projects, like the controversial New York-New Jersey tunnel or disaster relief to Puerto Rico.

Lawmakers must be especially cautious with these additions when working on such a tight timeline. Including a provision that passes in the house of origin, but might be a poison pill for the other house or the president would lead to a shutdown.

So, it was with quiet optimism that California Republicans, led by House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-Bakersfield), introduced the Shasta Dam expansion as a rider.

So, it was with quiet optimism that California Republicans, led by House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R- Bakersfield), introduced the Shasta Dam expansion as a rider.

As of last week, it seemed possible that the proposal would be included in the omnibus bill.

If enacted, it would allow the project to access the \$20 million in federal infrastructure dollars already tentatively allocated to raise the dam 18.5 feet.

Such an effort would add approximately 634,000 acre-feet to the reservoir's capacity of 4.5 million acre-feet.

Until California identified sources to fully fund the project, however, federal law prohibited federal spending for the project. McCarthy's bill would eliminate that requirement for the Shasta project and allow activity to begin immediately – in theory.

Legal Issues and Ultimate Failure

Once underway, the expansion is projected to cost more than \$1.3 billion and would likely face a variety of legal challenges.

California Secretary of Natural Resources John Laird, in a recent letter to Congress, detailed the California Wild and Scenic Rivers Act violations the project would create. Opposition also comes from the Winnemem Wintu Tribe. Many of their remaining sacred sites would be inundated by the higher reservoir. Fishermen, environmentalists and local residents also oppose raising the dam.

Thus, it was no surprise that California's congressional Democrats listened to the state party and stripped the bill from omnibus consideration.

Given the Republicans' narrow and tenuous majorities in both houses, Democratic votes are required to pass the bill. The Democrats used this leverage to request stipulations requiring any activity on the project to comply with federal and state law, effectively killing the bill.

Implications for Agriculture

Shasta Dam is part of the federal Central Valley Project system. This system protects against flooding, stores water primarily for agricultural interests and provides deliveries for a broad array of south-of-Delta contractors.

Among the most well-known contractors are farmers from the massive Westlands Water District. Despite their political influence, these farmers are last in line for water rights. Thus they are highly motivated to gain more reliable sources of irrigation water.

In this particular instance, critics tied this effort by the Trump administration and Rep. McCarthy to former Westlands lawyer and current Department of Interior Deputy Secretary David Bernhardt.

Though some have suggested McCarthy's proposal to be a result of "cronyism," Bernhardt said he would comply with conflict-of-interest rules.

Westlands Response

Tom Birmingham, the general manager of Westlands, told The Sacramento Bee that he disagreed with the actions of state leaders and congressional Democrats to block the project. He said that expanding Shasta's capacity "makes eminently good sense" for both environmental and water-supply needs.

Given the reluctance of state leaders to build new water infrastructure, it is uncertain when more storage will be available.

<http://gvwire.com/2018/03/20/democrats-kill-proposed-dam-expansion/>



News Analysis

Drew Phillips

Bill McEwen is news director and columnist for GV Wire. He joined GV Wire in August 2017 after 37 years at The Fresno Bee. With The Bee, he served as Opinion Editor, City Hall reporter, Metro columnist, sports columnist and sports editor through the years. His work has been frequently honored by the California Newspapers Publishers Association, including authoring first-place editorials in 2015 and 2016. Bill and his wife, Karen, are proud parents of two adult sons, and they have two grandsons. You can contact Bill at 559-492-4031 or at bmcewen@gvwire.com.



Drew Phelps has a knack for mining complex data, a skill he honed while working on several local political campaigns. At GV Wire, Phelps regularly conducts extensive research and goes on lengthy fact-checking missions. Phelps graduated from Pitzer College with a bachelor's in political studies and then went on to obtain a master's degree from Claremont Graduate University in American politics. You can contact Drew at 559-440-8321 or at dphelps@gvwire.com

