

# The Fresno Bee



## ‘Deep State’ isn’t Nunes’ first conspiracy theory. Guess who he blames for the drought

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FRESNO – The last time I saw my congressman, Devin Nunes, in the flesh, it was the spring of 2014 and California was parched.



Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Tulare, asks a question during a hearing on trade policy in March in Washington, D.C.

The federal project that delivered water north to south – from mountain to farm to city – had shut off its spigot. What little snowmelt California had left was needed up in the Delta to keep alive endangered fish.

The farmers looked haunted as they gathered at City Hall that day to attend a congressional field hearing on the drought. To irrigate their crops, they were siphoning the entire flow of our local rivers and pumping like mad from the aquifer below. Now this water, too, was turning to sand.

Nunes knew the sky hadn’t spilled enough rain in three years. He knew we were facing the hottest and driest spell on record. But it wasn’t drought that bedeviled our valley, he’d told us. It was a conspiracy hatched by the Communists.

I knew a thing or two about water since writing a book called “[The King of California](#)” that told the story of the cotton empire of J.G. Boswell, which had risen out of the

bottom of Tulare Lake, once the biggest body of freshwater west of the Mississippi. I had heard a lot of cockamamie reasons to explain the movement of snowmelt up and down the state. But it never occurred to me that real live Communists were influencing our gravity.

I thought I'd attend the [field hearing of the House Committee on Natural Resources](#) to hear for myself the congressman's logic. Though we were both valley boys, I had never seen Nunes in action. I had come from a tribe of Armenians who grew grapes and cooked raisins in the Fresno sun. He came from a tribe of Azorean Portuguese who grew alfalfa and milked cows in Tulare.

The Azorean Portuguese I knew were a gregarious bunch. They drank sweet wine and celebrated the pig in an annual blood sausage festival. At their elaborate bullfights, they stepped into the ring with swords that didn't draw blood but stuck to pads of Velcro affixed to the bulls. A good many of them returned to the Azores every summer to taste the bread and fish of the Atlantic.

Nunes, by contrast, was almost completely grim. Term after term, for more than a decade in office, he had staked out the most extreme position on water in the West. The bills he authored had little chance of influencing debate, much less becoming law. And yet every two years, we sent him back to Washington D.C. by an ever wider margin.

In an interview with The Bee, Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Tulare, was asked if he planned to host any local forums or town hall meetings. "Your paper is a joke to even bring these issues up or raise these issues," Nunes responded.

As the hearing opened, Nunes launched into a statement that would have made Father Coughlin proud. The Delta smelt, the two-inch fish that had shut down the federal pumps, was part of a left-wing conspiracy so vast it boggled the mind. The environmentalists in San Francisco were literally attempting to erase the San Joaquin Valley from the map, he said. "These radicals," he added ominously, "never tire of battle and never give up."

Government authorities were working in cahoots with the leftists. The dying smelt had become a convenient cover to toss away millions of acre feet of water during drought. This was water destined for the valley, water that was being wasted on the ocean. "This is not a result of global warming or drought," Nunes intoned. "It's a result of government run amok."

Four years later, I watch from afar as the dairy farmer's son, now a player on the national stage, joins hands with Fox TV showman Sean Hannity to conjure a "deep state" conspiracy to protect a president.

Their act may appear to the rest of the nation as a new and peculiar manifestation of the Trump Age. But back here, we haven't forgotten how Nunes and Hannity first teamed up to sell a conspiracy theory of an earlier California drought, circa 2009.

That summer, Hannity came to the San Joaquin Valley to see how President Obama had supposedly turned the most productive farmland in America into a “Dust Bowl.” He devoted an entire live broadcast to what he called “[The Valley Hope Forgot](#).” Standing in an open field in Huron, thousands of agitated rural folk surrounding him, he held up a giant photo of the Delta smelt. It might as well have been a great white shark.

News footage depicted orchards uprooted, fields fallowed and equipment spoiling to rust. Never mind that the fallowed dirt where Hannity and Nunes were standing next to each other had produced a bounty of tomatoes the day before. One hundred feet away, beyond camera frame, acre after acre of irrigated green fields awaited harvest.

“Nowhere in the world has a democracy ever starved its own people of water,” Nunes said.

“I never saw an issue where it was so simple,” Hannity concluded. “Just turn the water on.”

Nunes, if not Hannity, surely knew that the federal pumps had been turned on for nearly three months, hurling water to these same fields and beyond. A local TV reporter questioned the show’s lying premise, but [Nunes would hear none of it](#).

“When you look at the radical environmental fringe, there’s no question they are tied closely to the Communist Party. I have the documents that can prove it,” Nunes claimed.

From drought to the federal investigation of Russia meddling in our elections, Nunes continues to reprise the old boogeyman. He lies the same way old Joseph McCarthy lied.

Drought is a left-wing conspiracy to bring down the farmer, he tells us. The Russia probe is a left-wing conspiracy to bring down Trump.

It’s becoming increasingly clear he doesn’t have the documents to prove either, and he’s blind to the paradox in his own assertions: The same man who believes the Communists are moving our water doesn’t believe they are moving our electorate.

Meanwhile, he has yet to squeeze an extra drop of water out of the federal system for the farmers. His push to fund Temperance Flat, yet another dam on the San Joaquin River, [recently fell short](#). So have his attempts to weaken environmental safeguards protecting the salmon and smelt.

“I am reminded of the old saying about the Soviet Union,” Nunes lectured his opponents during one congressional debate on a pro-farmer water bill. “If you tell a lie long enough, eventually people will believe you.” That water bill, too, not surprisingly, went down in defeat.

My neighbor farmers are still hoping Nunes might be repaid for his loyalty to Trump, that the Interior Department will gut the Endangered Species Act and free up more water for agriculture. In 2016, Nunes hosted a fundraiser for Trump in the east side

citrus belt. Trump seemed to grasp, if nothing else, the message hitched to the old cotton trailers along Highway 99. [“There is no drought,” he told us.](#)

Some farmers now wonder if Nunes’ role as chairman of the House Intelligence Committee has gone to his head. Even if the art of compromise was in his blood, they say, his Deep State fixations leave little room to do the hard work of fixing California’s oversubscribed water system. They dare to say that Sen. Dianne Feinstein has been a far more effective advocate on water than Nunes.

His [\\$7 million in campaign cash](#) reflects how far [he has detached himself in spirit from our district](#). Little of the money comes from people here.

Tens of thousands of dollars pour in from right-wing supporters of Israel, for instance, including members of the [Republican Jewish Coalition](#) who [hosted Nunes at their convention in Las Vegas last year](#) and pushed Trump to sunder the Iran nuclear deal.

This would seem a [long ways](#) from [Boss Hogg’s Country Kitchen in Farmersville](#). Jim Gorden, who farms mandarins and blood oranges in the district, said he understands Nunes’ calculation. “I look at Devin and think he’s [lost his way](#). He’s not doing anything for the district. He’s off chasing ghosts.

“But this part of the valley is more like Georgia than the rest of California. Most people here don’t care that he’s neglecting their issues. As long as he’s throwing red meat at them, they’ll send him back to Washington for more.”

Video link: <https://www.fresnobee.com/news/local/article201659539.html>



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