

Interior Secretary Zinke visits reservoirs, signaling federal interest in water fight

BY KEN CARLSON

kcarlson@modbee.com

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Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke paid a visit Friday to two reservoirs that are embroiled in an intense fight over water allocations in the Northern San Joaquin Valley.



New Melones Lake Marina in Calif., Friday, July 20, 2018.

The visit from a high-level official in the Trump administration raised hopes from local farmers and irrigation districts that federal intervention will stop a state Water Board proposal to allocate more water from New Melones and Don Pedro reservoirs to restore the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. The state proposal also calls for increased Merced River flows.

Zinke was accompanied by Rep. Jeff Denham, R-Turlock, whose two amendments to block part of the state's "water grab" passed the House of Representatives on Thursday. Zinke, along with Congressman Tom McClintock, sat at a picnic table to talk with media at Don Pedro.

“I do believe part of the solution in California is more storage,” said Zinke, who oversees millions of acres of federal land and natural resources. In contrast to regional battles in the West over Colorado River water, Zinke said, water is plentiful in the Sierra watersheds for meeting needs.



Smoke fills the air above Don Pedro Reservoir, Calif., Friday, July 20, 2018.

“Let’s get to a solution without breaking water districts and saddling them with millions of dollars in costs,” Zinke said.

The federal government has more to do with operation of New Melones, which is part of the federally backed Central Valley Project. But local officials believe federal assistance could also influence what happens with Tuolumne River water stored at Don Pedro.

Zinke gleaned information Friday on the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission relicensing of Don Pedro, co-owned by Modesto and Turlock irrigation districts.

Zinke told the press that \$25 million in ratepayers money paid for scientific studies for the FERC relicensing and the study results have been ignored.

The two districts hope that agencies under the Department of Interior, such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, will take another look at the studies under Zinke’s direction. Additional flows to support fisheries in the Delta are expected to be required under the FERC relicensing and the Water Board plan.

“We are grateful for Secretary Zinke’s attendance and believe his presence today can only benefit our relicensing process,” TID Board Member Michael Frantz said.

Republican leaders have recently made attempts to shape water policies in California, with Southern California Congressman Ken Calvert’s bill in May to make the Delta

Tunnels project immune from lawsuits and an amendment last month from Congressman David Valadao of Hanford to extend the proposed ban on court reviews to other water projects in the Golden State.

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Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke, middle, talks with the press accompanied by Rep. Jeff Denham, right, and congressman Tom McClintock, left, at Don Pedro Reservoir, Calif., Friday, July 20, 2018.

The federal Bureau of Reclamation also has a proposal for boosting water deliveries in the Central Valley. Early this month, the state Water Board angered farmers with a final proposal to require 40 percent unimpeded flows in the Tuolumne, Stanislaus and Merced rivers. While the state says the flows are needed to save the Delta's ecosystem, opponents claim the loss of water will devastate agriculture and the economy.

Denham said the state proposal, which could be approved next month, is a disastrous plan to flush water from Valley rivers to the ocean. "This is going to be an ongoing fight until we have a federal government nexus to stop this," Denham said.

The recent legislation could stumble in the Senate, where the GOP holds a slim majority; nonetheless, the federal action is cheered by Valley conservatives.

Democrats have strongly opposed the GOP proposal to exempt water projects from judicial review, calling it irresponsible.

Barbara Barragan-Parrilla, director of Restore the Delta of Stockton, said Denham's amendment to thwart the Water Board "is further dividing people in his district who need to come together and try to solve the problems" in the Delta. She charged the Calvert bill would abolish protections for the San Francisco Bay and Delta estuary.

The state Water Board said Friday it does not comment on pending legislation, but said Denham's bill appears to preclude Department of Interior from spending in the upcoming fiscal year to comply with the Bay-Delta plan. State legal staff said the Bureau of Reclamation has been responsible in the past two decades for complying with the plan through water rights permits.

Zinke noted Friday the different government bureaus in the Department of Interior will need to get on the same page to achieve solutions in disputes over water.

At New Melones, Calaveras County Supervisor Dennis Mills asked Zinke to forward a letter to President Trump, asking for an executive order forbidding any water controlled or owned by the U.S. government to be released as part of the Water Board's plan.

"The time has come to take off the gloves and fight for our community, our region and our state opposing stupid policies," Jack Cox of the Lake Tulloch Alliance wrote Friday.



Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke, middle, talks with marina owner Darin Mills, right, at New Melones Lake in Calif., Friday, July 20, 2018. Rep. Jeff Denham, is at left and congressman Tom McClintock is second right.



Rancher and farmer Todd Sill of La Grange stands outside the Don Pedro Recreation area with a message for visiting Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke at Don Pedro Reservoir, Calif., Friday, July 20, 2018.

Assemblyman Adam Gray, D-Merced, and other Valley lawmakers joined the Modesto Irrigation District in asking for a 30-day delay on the July 27 deadline for comments on the Water Board proposal and for postponement of the Aug. 21 meeting. The state board notified the MID the request was denied.

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