

Rep. Jim Costa visits New Exchequer Dam in support of project

Published: July 2, 2013 Updated 13 hours ago

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Rep. Jim Costa toured New Exchequer Dam on Tuesday, the site of legislation he's supporting to study expanding its capacity.



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Deputy General Manager Bryan Kelly gives Rep. Jim Costa a tour of the Exchequer Dam Tuesday, July 2, 2013. The Congressman is supporting legislation that would look into expanding the capacity of Lake McClure by 70,000 acre feet.

The \$40 million project would expand reservoir capacity by up to 70,000 acre-feet by raising the spillway as much as 10 feet at its main storage reservoir, Lake McClure. An acre-foot is the amount of water it would take to cover one acre one foot deep.

Costa and Rep. Tom McClintock, R-Elk Grove, introduced a bill in Congress that would permit the project to be studied, but it would still need federal approval.

"This year, it's going to be another dry year for the people of the valley and California," Costa said. "Every drop of water saved is a benefit."

About 1,800 feet of the Merced River, which feeds into Lake McClure, has overlapping boundaries — the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission's boundary and the "wild and scenic" protections boundary.

Currently, more than 120 miles of the Merced River are protected. However, the legislation proposes moving the protected boundary about a half-mile upstream from where it flows into Lake McClure, allowing the reservoir to store more water during wet years.

MID Deputy General Manager Bryan Kelly said the extra water would allow his organization to bank water in wet years to be used in dry years. The east side of the county is not connected to federal or state pumps, Kelly said.

"This is it," he said. "Eastern Merced County has no water if Lake McClure is dry."

Kelly said local authorities have reached a consensus that the project is a good one.

If approved, critics say, the proposal would be the first time a wild and scenic boundary has been changed and would set a harmful precedent nationwide.

They also claim the project threatens the Limestone Salamander, a species that is fully protected by state law, because the extra water would periodically flood about a half-mile of the Merced River. According to the MID, that issue would be among others considered in the FERC's review.

But critics also question whether the project is viable for MID customers.

However, the MID points out that additional water supplied by the project would support the region's agricultural industry, a third of the economy in Merced County. It also isn't requesting federal sources to pay for the project, but will instead put together a capital improvement plan.

Officials said the project also would enhance groundwater storage, provide flood control benefits and generate up to 10,000-megawatt hours of hydropower per year.

In June 2012, the same bill was carried by Rep. Jeff Denham, R-Turlock, and was approved by a House vote, but didn't make it through the Senate.

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McClatchy reporter Mike Doyle contributed to this report.

<http://www.mercedsunstar.com/2013/07/02/3094784/rep-jim-costa-visits-new-exchequer.html>