

The Modesto Bee

Critics blast bill to expand McClure

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WASHINGTON -- A wild-and- scenic stretch of the Merced River in Central California would lose some of its appeal so that farmers could get more water as part of a wide-ranging package approved by a House panel Wednesday.

By allowing the man-made Lake McClure to expand, the bill written by Rep. Jeff Denham, R-Atwater, would aid growers during dry years. It would also, for the first time, allow inundation of a waterway that's protected as a National Wild and Scenic River.

"We should be able to adjust those boundaries if it serves the greater good," Denham said, adding that "the bill is common-sense legislation that would lead to desperately needed water storage."

But critics contend that the measure would "do real harm to the Merced Wild and Scenic River," as Rep. Raul Grijalva, D-Ariz., put it Wednesday, and its long-term prospects in the Senate are unclear.

The House Natural Resources Committee approved the Merced River bill along with about 20 others that, taken together, largely underscore House Republican sentiments toward public land and water policies.

One, written by Rep. Tom McClintock, R-Granite Bay, would block the Western Area Power Administration from using federal stimulus funds for new wind and solar energy projects.

"We're not opposed to any form of energy that can stand on its own merits," McClintock said.

McClintock repeatedly invoked the name of Solyndra, the California solar energy firm that went bankrupt despite \$528 million in federal loan guarantees.

The Western Area Power Administration debate lasted a long time, while the Merced River bill debate lasted only a few minutes.

The latter bill would allow the Merced Irrigation District to potentially modify New Exchequer Dam, by adding gates atop the emergency spillway. The \$40 million project would allow the irrigation district to store an additional 70,000 acre-feet of water.

Currently, an average of 300,000 acre-feet of water annually is provided through New Exchequer Dam.

Even if Denham's bill passes, the final decision on expanding Lake McClure would be up to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, which will be considering a hydroelectric power license application that's up for renewal in 2014.

The legal wrinkle is that expanding Lake McClure would inundate roughly half a mile of a river that's part of the National Wild and Scenic River system.

The wild-and-scenic river law specifies that protected rivers "shall be preserved in a free-flowing condition."

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