

APPROPRIATIONS

Calif. dam controversy a flashpoint in spending talks

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The Shasta Dam in California. Ron Reiring/Flickr

A long-running feud over the Shasta Dam is sparking a clash between the House's top leaders as they seek to negotiate a year-end spending package.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.) are at odds over a push by the Trump administration and Republicans to raise the Shasta Dam in Northern California by 18.5 feet.

California Attorney General Xavier Becerra (D) recently blocked the Westlands Water District from working on a plan to raise it.

House leadership aides from both parties confirm McCarthy has proposed a deal that would allow some federal funding for Shasta Dam work in fiscal 2020, while providing \$10 million in federal loans for rehabilitation and maintenance work at the Presidio, a former Army base that is now a national park site in Pelosi's San Francisco district.

"Why not give both a win," said a House GOP leadership aide, who argued the dam project has been previously authorized by Congress. The aide noted all other dam funding projects sought by the White House this year would be funded.

But a Pelosi aide said McCarthy is holding "hostage" Presidio funding that was already supported by negotiators to get dollars for the controversial dam.

"Shasta is not in either the House or the Senate bill, a California court found it violates state law, there is no longer any local sponsor, and reclamation cannot proceed with the project without a local, nonfederal sponsor. As such, it makes no sense to fund it in the appropriations bill," the Pelosi aide said.

The Republican aide said funding for both should be in the package. Otherwise, neither should be included.

Environmental groups warn raising the dam would flood the protected McCloud River, which includes a trout fishery and sacred tribal lands.

Backers counter the project would be a step toward resolving the state's perennial water shortfalls and especially help Central Valley farmers.

The fight over Shasta is the highest-profile environmental issue still in play as lawmakers press to wrap up a spending accord by next week.

Pelosi has the votes to win the fight, but losing McCarthy's support could make a broad, bipartisan funding deal harder to achieve and move on a tight time frame.

Lawmakers say they are facing a deadline of the end of this week for assembling spending legislation if they hope to move it before current funding expires on Dec. 20. Without a deal, lawmakers are expected to approve another stopgap spending bill to level-fund agencies into the new year rather than force a federal shutdown.

House and Senate appropriators said this week one or two packages that could include most if not all 12 spending bills remain possible. But they say a host of policy fights, among them the fight over the Shasta Dam, will need to be settled quickly.

"There are so many things hanging out there. We think we are close, and then something erupts. We are at crunch time now," said Senate Appropriations Chairman Richard Shelby (R-Ala.), noting he, other top appropriators and Pelosi are set to meet with Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin today to try for an agreement.

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