

The Fresno Bee

Valley seeks drought relief in D.C.

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WASHINGTON — Fresno-area officials and business leaders hope to turn on the financial and water taps during their annual federal lobbying trip this week.

But so far, they've hit some dry wells. "Lately, it's gotten more and more frustrating with the agencies," Lydia R. Zabrycki, director of business partnering for the San Joaquin Valley engineering firm, Quad Knopf, said Tuesday. "It's frustrating because we spent a lot of time and money to come back here."

Zabrycki is one of two dozen participants in the annual Fresno Council of Governments "One Voice" trip that kicked off with a legislative briefing Sunday and concludes this afternoon at the White House.

As always, the consensus lobbying priorities range from surface transportation projects to air quality improvement.

Specific proposals include a high-speed rail training facility, funding for Fresno's Bus Rapid Transit project and designation of the San Joaquin Valley as an "air and health quality empowerment zone" in order to make certain pollution-fighting grants available.

More than ever before, though, the Fresno County delegation that includes city council members, mayors, city managers and more arrived at downtown Washington's Mayflower Hotel this year with one focal point in mind.

"Water, water, water, water," said Jeffrey T. Roberts, vice president of Granville Homes.

The challenges confronting the delegation members were underscored Monday, when they met at the Commerce Department with a senior adviser from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Several meeting participants said the message they heard was that drought was essentially a California problem.

"We were all kind of stunned by the response," Clovis City Council Member Lynne Ashbeck said.

In a succession of briefings, including some in the underground Capitol Visitor Center, the delegation members also got the low-down on legislative prospects from staff and lawmakers. So far, 3 1/2 months into the start of the new Congress, details, procedures and timetables on potential California water legislation remain uncertain.

The seemingly casual pace contrasts with Republicans' efforts last year to speed legislation to the House floor without going through the usual committee process.

The House water and power subcommittee, formerly chaired by California Republican Rep. Tom McClintock, is now chaired by a Louisiana Republican, Rep. John Fleming, who has not yet scheduled a hearing on the California drought.

One possibility that has been discussed is for eventual California provisions to be folded into a broader Western states water package prepared by the Republican- controlled Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, chaired by Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska.

The Fresno COG's regional water priorities span new storage projects, including the long-debated Temperance Flat Dam on the Upper San Joaquin River.

Based on lessons learned in Washington, D.C. this week, the rejiggered priorities also include getting federal officials clued in.

"They need to listen and start paying attention," Ashbeck said, adding that "we need to do a better job of telling our story, as a collective Valley community."



Low water is seen at Millerton Lake with historic Millerton Courthouse, right, above the waterline. Officials lobbying in Washington, D.C., this week say many consider the drought California's problem.

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