



Concerns over Central Valley woes dominate data collection hearing

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Lawmakers who gathered yesterday to examine federal water data programs ended up immersed in a bickering session over water management in California's drought-ridden Central Valley.

At the outset of the Water and Power Subcommittee hearing, ranking member Tom McClintock (R-Calif.) derided the decision to hold a session on water data instead of examining the water and economic woes of farmers in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

The valley is suffering from a three-year drought, and area lawmakers from both sides of the aisle have been pushing measures to waive two federal biological opinions that have restricted the amount of water that can be pumped from the delta to protect endangered fish species.

"There's no time to waste on reversing the plight of the San Joaquin Valley because what is happening there can happen anywhere else in the West and is entirely in our power to solve," McClintock said. "To ignore their pleas continues to give the impression that this subcommittee lets the San Joaquin Valley burn while the committee fiddles with lower priority matters like water data management."

Chairwoman Grace Napolitano (D-Calif.) accused McClintock of "making it political" and urged him to stick to the day's subject.

"I can assure the chairwoman it is not political," McClintock later responded. "Republicans, Democrats and independents are all equally condemned to chronic unemployment and poverty as the deliberate decision of this government to divert 200 billion gallons of water from Central Valley agriculture to enhance the environment of the delta smelt."

McClintock on Monday wrote to Napolitano and Natural Resources Chairman Nick Rahall (D-W.Va.) urging them to hold a field hearing on the issue, saying two similar requests from his colleagues had been "met with silence."

Napolitano yesterday said the subcommittee is not avoiding the subject and has held a number of hearings on California water issues.

Water data and climate change

Turning to the issue the hearing was meant to address -- whether federal agencies are providing adequate and accessible data about water management and climate variability --

a U.S. Geological Survey official told lawmakers that without more federal funding, the agency is in imminent danger of losing critical water data programs that supply information to local, state and federal decision-makers.

The federal government currently provides about a third of the funding, or \$140 million a year, to operate 7,500 stream gages nationwide.

But the state, local and tribal governments that provide most of the funding for the system are eliminating hundreds of gages due to money woes amid the national economic crisis, Larsen said.

"It's not just a matter of losing a gage -- you also lose the information for maybe 50 or 100 years, for the old ones," Larsen said. "Those provide critical information for making decisions about flood frequency for the Weather Service, about infrastructure near a river - - you need to have long-term statistics to make those types of decisions."

USGS is "about cut to the bone," said Michael Strobel, who serves on the water resources committee at National Research Council, which recently completed a review of the USGS water data program.

"They're hiking up the mountain and they're continually having to shed resources because of stable or declining funding, and their costs go up every year," Strobel said. "Any further declines we feel will cause irreparable damage to the data collection and information system."

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