

California lawmakers vote to block Trump's environmental rollbacks, defying Newsom

September 17 2019, by Phil Willon



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

California lawmakers, over Gov. Gavin Newsom's objections, passed sweeping legislation early Saturday allowing the state to impose strict endangered species protections and water pumping restrictions for the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.

The governor must now decide whether to veto the bill and raise the ire of California environmentalists, who will surely accuse him of sidling up to the Trump administration, or sign the bill into law and potentially anger the state's biggest water agencies.

The issues involving the delta, which provides water for more than 25 million people and millions of acres of Central Valley farmland, became the biggest political flashpoint in the legislation, which is cast to shield California from the Trump administration's rollback of federal environmental and labor protections.

State Senate President Pro Tem Toni Atkins, D-San Diego, one of the most powerful politicians in Sacramento, led the legislation. Sending the bill to Newsom's desk marks one of the first times these two leaders have clashed over major state policy. That could have implications for their future relationship, potentially complicating the governor's legislative agenda.

Senate Bill 1 would allow state agencies to adopt protections under the federal Endangered Species Act, Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, Fair Labor Standards Act and other major environmental and labor laws that were in place before President Donald Trump took office in January 2017.

"I think we are living in times that demand our urgent action to protect our state's natural resources, our environment and worker safety," Atkins said shortly before the bill passed.

Many of the labor and environmental provisions were not controversial. But numerous water agencies, including the influential Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, feared the endangered species provisions and delta pumping restrictions would limit their water supply at key times of the year.

The Newsom administration shared some of those concerns, as did U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., and four Central Valley Democrats in Congress who submitted a letter last week requesting the bill be amended.

Atkins was adamant about preserving the protections for wildlife, setting up a possible showdown with the Democratic governor as the 2019 legislative session wound to a close Friday night.

Environmental groups, which were a key part of the liberal coalition that helped elect Newsom, saw SB 1 as one of their top priorities for this year's legislative session. The bill had strong support from Sierra Club California, the Natural Resources Defense Council, Audubon California and other groups. It sailed through the state Senate in May on a 28-10 vote, and went through several changes, based on meetings with various parties.

"The California Legislature basically is saying, 'California, you don't have to worry, we have your back,'" said Kathryn Phillips, director of Sierra Club California. "Americans do not want dirty air. They want water they can drink. And they aren't happy with what Trump is doing to the environment."

Phillips said she is confident that Newsom will sign the legislation when it lands on his desk, noting that he was elected on an "environmental platform, and this is consistent with what he ran on."

Both Republicans and Democratic lawmakers, primarily from the Central Valley, spoke out against the bill.

Sen. Jim Nielsen, R-Gerber, said the law would rekindle California's water wars. Republican Assemblyman Devon Mathis of Visalia said it was a "knee-jerk reaction" by a state Legislature dominated by the

Democratic Party. He said it would devastate agriculture in the Central Valley by cutting its water supply, an assertion that supporters of the bill refute.

"What this bill does is turn my area of the state literally into a dust bowl," Mathis said during the Assembly debate on the bill Friday evening. "I have some of the highest poverty rates, I have one of the largest Latino immigrant areas. And these people depend on agricultural work, which means they depend on water."

The key legislative fight involved efforts to protect delta smelt, Chinook salmon and steelhead trout by limiting the amount of water that can be siphoned away. Water users, including Central Valley farms and Southern California cities, have clashed with environmentalists over that issue for decades.

In the last several weeks, water interests have ramped up a campaign to derail the legislation or have it significantly amended.

Jennifer Pierre, general manager of the State Water Contractors association, said recently that the proposed bill would have locked in outdated federal rules that regulate water pumping and species protections in the delta. As a result, new scientific findings that offer prescriptions for better water and species management practices would be ignored, she said.

The bill's biggest hitch was a provision that would impose the state's endangered species protections and pumping restrictions on the Central Valley Project, the water system run by the federal Bureau of Reclamation. The Central Valley Project provides much of the water consumed by farms and people in the Central Valley heart of California.

Water districts that receive water from the Central Valley Project

threatened to walk away from voluntary agreements being negotiated between them and state regulatory agencies. The pacts were aimed at allowing greater flexibility in how to protect endangered species and divert water from the delta. Newsom supported the voluntary agreements and did not want to see them derailed, administration officials said, which is why he had urged Atkins to amend the bill.

Jeffrey Kightlinger, general manager of the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, said those agreements would benefit both water users and the ecosystem. Such gains will be lost if Newsom signs the bill, he said.

"If it goes into law, I suspect everyone goes back to their camps and sues each other," Kightlinger said. "The supporters of this [bill](#) know that and decided it's worth it."

Phillips called those arguments by water agencies disingenuous. The water agencies and Central Valley farmers want the Trump administration's weakened endangered species protections in place so they can pump more water from the delta, she said.

Since Trump has taken office, there have been questions whether water users would agree to settlements proposed during the administration of Gov. Jerry Brown, or seek better deals now that Trump administration has pushed rollbacks.

In August, the White House took action to weaken the 45-year-old Endangered Species Act, including removing protections for species recently added to the threatened list. This week, it announced it would weaken Obama-era rules on protecting wetlands.

The Los Angeles Times last month also reported that federal officials suppressed a lengthy environmental report detailing how a number of

California species would be jeopardized by Trump's plans to deliver more delta [water](#) to Central Valley farms.

The Metropolitan Water District has defended the federal government's actions, saying that little has changed, a claim [environmental groups](#) have disputed as propaganda.

©2019 Los Angeles Times

Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

Citation: California lawmakers vote to block Trump's environmental rollbacks, defying Newsom (2019, September 17) retrieved 28 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-09-california-lawmakers-vote-block-trump.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.