Drought Politics Grip California's Central Valley

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In California's farm rich Central Valley, where President Obama meets Friday with farmers and others who are affected by the state's historic drought, Todd Allen nods towards a field of brown, baked dirt passing by the right side of his truck.

"Here's a plot of ground that I'm not going to be able to farm. That's 160 acres," he says.

Allen owns a farm about an hour's drive west of Fresno, where half of the country's produce is grown. Usually Allen's fields contain cantaloupe, cotton, tomato and wheat.

"But now because of the drought I'm going to have leave it fallow," he says.
Fallow. Or unplanted. Allen says he's going to have to do that with 450 of his 600 acres and that it could put him out of business.

The drought is forcing hundreds of thousands of acres in the Central Valley to go unplanted this year.

But many farmers, like Allen, aren't just blaming Mother Nature for that.

"Twenty to thirty percent of our water is gone because of a little fish," he says.

That little fish is the delta smelt. You've probably never heard of it. But in California, it's representative of a decades old clash over water allocation.

There's not a lot of water in California. And there are a lot of people who want it: environmentalists, farmers, city folk.

The delta smelt is one species, caught in the middle of the debate.

"It's a convenient boogeyman," says Adam Keats. "It's a scapegoat."

Keats, who's with the Center for Biological Diversity, says the smelt are a key part of a complex ecosystem. They live in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, where much of the Central Valley's water comes from.

They are also on the endangered species list.

And that means some of the Delta's water that would go to farmers like Allen is instead, allocated to the fish.

The result is a farmer versus fish controversy that's been going on for years in the state. This year, that political fight has enticed Washington.

"How you can favor a fish over people, is something that people in my part of the world would never understand," said House Speaker John Boehner during a visit to California several weeks ago.

He was there to support a bill — introduced by California's House Republicans — that aims to get farmers more water by rolling back environmental laws like the ones that protect the smelt.
Senate Democrats countered this week, with a bill that would give money for drought relief, and allow more flexibility around those environmental laws without gutting them.

Neither is likely to become law. So why all of the effort?

"Politicians don't want to let a good crisis go to waste," says Tom Holyoke, a professor of water and politics at Fresno State University.

He says that's especially true with mid-term elections coming up. Just turn on the TV, where there are ads like this one from Republican Doug Ose, who's standing in the dried out bottom of Folsom Lake: "We're facing a real water crisis here in Sacramento. Where's our representatives?"

The ads illustrate just how much the drought is going to be a part of campaign season. Ose is trying to unseat a freshman House Democrat who just barely won in 2012.

Democrats are doing the same in vulnerable Republican districts, targeting the GOP legislation that puts farmer's needs first.

"Saying 'we should re-allocate water to my constituents' doesn't require a whole lot of courage and is really an act of opportunism," says Michael Hanneman, an agriculture and resource economics professor at UC Berkeley.

He says that type of grandstanding doesn't accomplish anything.

California Governor Jerry Brown would agree. He and some state lawmakers have been annoyed with Washington's involvement — particularly the Republican sponsored bill. Brown calls it unwelcome and divisive.

The state's key water users have made efforts to reconcile their differences. But Hanneman says lawmakers haven't made the difficult, far-ranging decisions that are needed.

"They have stayed away from it. And they have stayed away from it because it's a situation where there's going to be winners and losers. So they don't want to touch it," he said.

But he says, sooner or later, they're going to have to. Barring a
miracle-March, this drought isn't going to go away.

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