

# THINK PROGRESS

## Drought Politics: How To Use California's



By Ari Phillips  
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A dark red blotch appears like a blood blister roughly outlining California's Central Valley, ready to burst and cover the rest of the state in crimson. It's a color not typically associated with this region, known for its farmlands that produce eight percent of the country's agricultural output in dollar value. But as of late January, the Central Valley has become the first part of California to ever be placed in the "exceptional drought" category by the National Drought Mitigation Center in its 14-year history.

2013 was the driest year California has seen since recordkeeping began in 1849. The drought has become so dire that according

to officials, 17 communities across the state are in danger of running out of water within 60 to 120 days. Snowpack, source of nearly two-thirds of the water supply for millions of people along the coast, is hovering at a record low of just twelve percent of average.

Most parched of all is the Central Valley — "the salad bowl of the world" — and as it becomes increasingly clear the region won't see relief from the crippling drought anytime soon, a debate is unfolding over what, or whom, to blame.

### **Fish Vs. People**

House Republicans from the region have taken to blaming ecosystem protection for limited irrigation flows. They are specifically target-

ing restoration efforts along the San Joaquin River, California's second largest river, painting the drought as a divisive issue that can win them political points. In mid-January, Speaker of the House John Boehner (R-OH) visited the Central Valley to announce emergency drought legislation for the region that would increase water available for agriculture by reducing river flows.

"How you can favor fish over people is something people in my part of the world would never understand," Boehner said, flanked by three Republican colleagues from the Central Valley — Rep. Devin Nunes of Tulare, Rep. Kevin McCarthy of Bakersfield and Rep. David Valadao of Hanford. Valadao said that while Congress cannot make it rain, they can provide relief from burdensome environmental regulations.

Nunes, who vehemently denies global warming, was also quick to call the drought a "man-made crisis."

A section on the House Natural Resources Committee's website called "The Man-Made California Drought" says that California's San Joaquin Valley "is in danger of becoming a dust bowl unless immediate action is taken to change policies that put the needs of fish above the livelihood of people."

The regulations in question limit the water that Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta agricultural pumps can use and preserve water for restoration of the San Joaquin River. The proposed bill would allow for more water to be pumped, suspend the restoration, and set up a joint Senate-House committee to come up with long-term solutions.

That bill, H.R. 3964, contains no mention of climate change.

## **A Sign Of Things To Come**

On Monday, California Gov. Jerry Brown responded to the Republicans' proposal, calling it "an unwelcome and divisive intrusion into California's efforts to manage this severe crisis."

In mid-January, Brown declared the state officially in drought, calling on Californians to conserve water in every way possible. A few days later, in his State of the State address, he called mitigating the effects of the drought "a tall order," saying, "we can take this drought as a stark warning of things to come."

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"The United Nations Panel on Climate Change says — with 95 percent confidence — that human beings are changing our climate," Brown said. "This means more droughts and more extreme weather events, and, in California, more forest fires and less snowpack."

In 2012, leading climatologist James Hansen wrote that "over the next several decades, the Western United States and the semi-arid region from North Dakota to Texas will develop semi-permanent drought ... California's Central Valley could no longer be irrigated. Food prices would rise to unprecedented levels."

Hansen reiterated that prediction in an email to Climate Progress' Joe Romm last week, writing that the current drought "will break, of course, likely with the upcoming El Nino,

but as long as we keep increasing greenhouse gases, intense droughts will increase, especially in the Southwest. Rainfall, when and where it comes will tend to be in more intense events, with more extreme flooding. These are not speculations, the science is clear.”

A report issued last year by the California Office of Environmental Health and Hazard Assessment titled Indicators of Climate Change in California found that the state’s agricultural industry will be hit especially hard by climate change. Over the last century, average temperatures in the Central Valley have increased more than 1.5° Fahrenheit. Costly summer heat waves that decrease agricultural output as well as increase irrigation needs and electricity demands are becoming more common.

Spring runoff from the Sierra Nevadas has also decreased around ten percent, which means less water for agriculture. Climate change will likely mean a compressed melt season in which runoff results in flooding and overtaxed dams that can’t store all the water.

The situation in California is dire and predicted to get worse before it gets better. The California Farm Water Coalition, an industry group, estimates that up to \$5 billion could be lost in 2014 due to the drought, impacting products such as beer, milk, wine, fruits, vegetables and nuts. The Central Valley city of Salinas recorded just 3.27 inches of rain last year, compared to an average of 15.46. This will result in a rapid increase in unemployment, as farming and food processing industries account for over a third of all Central Valley jobs.

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When considering the ecological impacts of the drought and climate change, “the scope of the problem is really huge,” said Jay Famiglietti, a hydrologist and professor of Earth System Science at UC-Irvine. “And when you think about the other side of these changing climate extremes — the flooding — that brings its own suite of problems and catastrophes. Then you start to get the idea of why I’m having trouble sleeping at night.”

Famiglietti thinks the political challenges and battles ensue both because people don’t really understand all the complicated water needs of the state and, at some level, for political gain. “I think there’s some intentional political manipulation,” Famiglietti said. “And sometimes for the right reasons. A Congressperson might be interested in making sure that farmers in his or her region have water. At the same time, I hear many in Congress say that if water flows underneath the Golden Gate Bridge, that’s a waste, which just isn’t true.”

### **Scoring Political Points**

If warnings of climate change’s impact on California’s Central Valley are nothing new, neither is the emergency drought legislation proposed by the House Republicans.

In response to Boehner and his colleagues’ calls for emergency drought legislation, Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) wrote a letter to the Congressmen, warning that “the new proposed

bill may follow the pattern of previous House bills which seek to either preempt state law or waive state water quality and Endangered Species Act requirements which could spur serious litigation and likely delay any action.”

From its headwaters in the high Sierra Nevada, the San Joaquin River travels 350 miles into the San Francisco Bay-Delta, a source of drinking water for some 22 million Californians and the largest estuary on the West Coast. Since completion of the Friant Dam in the 1940s, nearly 95 percent of the river’s flow has been diverted for irrigation. According to the California State Department of Water Resources, statewide agriculture uses 80 percent of the water consumed by people and businesses in an average year — around 34 million of the 43 million acre-feet diverted from rivers, lakes and groundwater sources. The San Joaquin River Restoration program aims to restore the hydrology of the river and in doing so, bring salmon and other fish runs back to the river as well.

John Laird, secretary of the state’s Natural Resources Agency, said that nearly identical legislation had been proposed before, and the state opposed it then, as it would now, for upending California water law and rights.

“We are rarely forced to confront water allocations this low, salinity in the delta, and difficulty moving water during a crisis. Now is not the time to be divided — now is the time to bring people together to find solutions,” Laird told the Bakersfield Californian.

While the drought plaguing their districts has brought the Central Valley Representatives into the discussion of ecosystem conservation and water distribution, environmental issues have

never been high on their respective priority lists. Reps. Nunes and McCarthy both score a four percent on the League of Conservation Voters Environmental Scorecard. Rep. Valadao is serving his first term in Congress and is yet to register a score.

Last year, concerned citizens presented Nunes, who represents California’s 22nd Congressional District, with the Congressional Climate Denier Award at his office in Clovis, California. In 2012, Nunes wrote that “despite dire predictions and prophetic warnings contained in a host of poorly researched Hollywood productions, there is no proof that our planet is warming because of mankind and there is certainly no proof that any of the radical changes proposed by environmentalists will end recent warming trends.”

Nunes is far from the only member of Congress taking a position that is fundamentally at odds with the vast majority of scientists. According to research by the Center For American Progress, 23 of the 26 Republicans on the House Committee on Natural Resources, where the emergency drought legislation is proposed, refuse to accept that human-caused climate change is happening.

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“In the past, politicians have used this type of situation as an opportunity to basically ignore the physical realities of our system,” said Brian Nowicki, California Climate Policy Director for the Center for Biological Diversity. “Every year in different ways throughout the country we see people trying to exploit frictions that arise around drought, saying that we need to



jettison those baseline requirements. Our point is that ignoring the bottom line requirements of an ecosystem means that you're willing to live and move forward without that ecosystem, which is untenable."

Until now, "nobody cared," Tony Quinn, an editor of the California Target Book, which gives information on California election campaigns, told the Los Angeles Times about the Central Valley's water dynamics. "Republicans are looking for an issue in this very Democratic state. Congressional candidates throughout the Central Valley are going to seize on this."

Adam Keats, Urban Wildlands Program Director for the Center for Biological Diversity, agrees that the issue is being manipulated for political gain.

"This is nothing new, a total scam," Keats said. "The equation of farms vs. fish is a flat-out lie. We're not talking about farms vs. fish, we're talking about distributing a limited resource to a whole lot of users across the state. We're talking about farms in Kern County vs. farms in the San Joaquin Valley, or we're talking about farmers vs. fishermen — because economies of the port cities rely on delta salmon runs. So they're just trotting out the same old, tired argument that people need to eat and that means fish need to make the sacrifice."