Surprise amendment divides Feinstein, some California farm groups

By Michael Doyle | McClatchy Newspapers


The amendment to a $32 billion Interior Department funding bill would have overturned two federal agency decisions and temporarily restored Valley irrigation deliveries. The Senate rejected the amendment by a largely party-line 61-36 margin.

Realistically, there was little chance the Senate would ever accept the amendment offered by an archconservative South Carolina lawmaker with zero experience in California water policy. Politically, though, the ambush amendment could still have lasting consequences.

"It was something of a Hail Mary," Andrew House, spokesman for Nunes, acknowledged Wednesday.

Nunes did not write the amendment offered by Republican Sen. Jim DeMint of South Carolina. Nunes' fingerprints, though, were all over it. And, in the wake of its defeat, Nunes has been seeking maximum partisan advantage, as he quickly declared that "California farmers (were) again denied water, this time by senators Feinstein and (Barbara) Boxer."

In turn, Feinstein's spokesman, Gil Duran, on Wednesday denounced the water amendment as a stunt.

Duran added that Feinstein has asked that the nonpartisan National Academy of Sciences undertake an independent review of the two biological opinions. Feinstein accompanied her written request with a letter from wealthy Southern
California businessman Stewart Resnick, who owns farm operations in the southern San Joaquin Valley.

The immediate dispute revolves around two "biological opinions" that federal resource agencies are using to guide protections for the Delta and various vulnerable species including salmon and the Delta smelt. Together, state officials estimate the two biological opinions issued by the Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service could result in water delivery cuts of about 30 percent.

In the House, Nunes failed in multiple efforts to block funding for the biological opinions. His vehemence eventually turned off Democrats who had previously supported him on the water issue, including Rep. Dennis Cardoza, D-Merced.

"This is baloney, to be doing this sort of thing," Cardoza said in July of Nunes' repeated water amendment efforts. "I have had a number of my colleagues tell me they are fed up with it."

Starting last week, House indicated, Nunes quietly helped orchestrate the surprise amendment offered Tuesday by DeMint. Nunes had previously helped persuade Fox News Channel commentator Sean Hannity to do an hour-long special on the Valley's water woes, and House said the television special aired last week "elevated the attention" given the region.

Feinstein was managing the Interior Department bill on the Senate floor late Tuesday afternoon when DeMint first advised her of the California water amendment.

"For a variety of reasons," House said, "we wanted to have the element of surprise."

The unexpected amendment concerning her home state clearly upset Feinstein, who called the effort "a kind of Pearl Harbor on everything we are trying to do" with California water.

"No one from California has called, written, or indicated they wanted this on the calendar," Feinstein said. "No one has indicated to me, as chairman of the committee, in all of the time (we) have been working on this bill, that this is what they wanted."

DeMint, though, could flourish letters in support of the water amendment signed by Westlands Water District, the California Farm Bureau Federation, the Western Growers Association and the California Grape and Tree Fruit League, among others. Westlands, whose leaders had publicly lauded Feinstein's water efforts during a meeting in August, also actively solicited support for the amendment Tuesday.

Some of these farm groups have financially supported Feinstein's past campaigns, and she has generally cultivated good relations with the state's agricultural organizations. Nonetheless, her office voiced clear displeasure with the farm groups that supported DeMint's surprise amendment, according to individuals familiar with the resulting communications.

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• Farmer2 wrote on September 24, 2:22 PM:

The big myth is that water exports are the main reason for the decline in the Delta. Yes, the pumps do kill fish, but it is not the main reason for the decline in the Delta. I guess it easiest to try to make Ag look like the "bad guy".

There are many reasons including 260 invasive, or nonnative, species – some that prey directly on the Delta Smelt and others that voraciously consume its food source – have proliferated in the Delta for several decades. Then there is the fact that each day up to one billion gallons of partially treated sewage wastewater is dumped into Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta and its associated waterways by communities around the Delta. This is killing fish. These communities are the same folks that cry about restoring the delta and water quality in the delta and they are the ones poisoning it!!! How can this be allowed to continue while turning off the water to farms? It is just ridiculous.

• rustyssc wrote on September 24, 12:26 PM:

solomon,
I found the same fact to be curious. Why is DeMint meddling in
California? All he needs to do is look around his home state of South Carolina. There are enough problems there to be taken care of first.

- **jmarkota** wrote on September 24, 11:50 AM:

  Ken:
  the left don't care. They push these wacko animal rights and global warming junk science. They would starve them selves or ask the government to feed them vs man being fed over animals. They just don't care about the enviroment or mankind.

- **Ken_Swanson** wrote on September 24, 10:36 AM:

  So the majority here is OK with the fact that the San Juaquin Valley is now a dust bowl, due in part to the "efforts" of Diane Feinstein and Barbara Boxer. Well, you're "cursing the farmer with your mouth full."

  This winter, you'll see your food prices go skyhigh and I guess you'll blame everybody but yourselves.

  "more corn than Iowa, more oranges than Florida, more dairies than Wisconsin ..." All these things and more are true of California, and more.

- **solomon** wrote on September 24, 10:07 AM:

  so a congressman from SOUTHCAROLINA puts forth a bill regarding california water? did you know SOUTHCAROLINA has some of the most polluted ground water in the country? this is due to enormous hog-farms and the lagoons that 'hold' the hog poop....sometimes thse lagoons dikes break and the hog poop 'spreads'......

- **ypochris** wrote on September 24, 9:52 AM:
Rockman - the apples in the store are from New Zealand because it is not yet apple season in the United States - not because of environmentalists, but because the Southern hemisphere has opposite seasons.

When and where have orchards ever been rooted up for "ecology issues" other than disease? Please explain.

• Berdawn wrote on September 24, 9:06 AM:
what a pathetic stunt by Nunes. (I expect little else from DeMint)

• jmarkota wrote on September 24, 9:00 AM:
Bottom line. people first. God put this planet and everything on it to serve man and mankind. We seem to forget that little fact. We eat first we drink first. End of discussion.

• rockman wrote on September 24, 1:57 AM:
Once again the little fishys are put ahead of growing food for humans. People have to eat folks. If we dont grow it here we have to import it and who husband is an international banker making money off international trade. Little fishys belong on the dinner plate. The ecology issues result in increased international trade to replace what we stop producing here in the USA. From steel, to minerals, to oil, to food now. Locally I drove by thousands of fruit trees being up rooted near where I live over ecology issues and walking into the store the sign read "Apples from New Zealand". follow the money trail, who is making money off of it.

• demative wrote on September 24, 1:34 AM:
And the Republicans just keep going and going and going. After 8 years of their snake-oil philosophies it has become a descriptive characteristic. This is WHO the Republicans are now. Back door, sneaky, crawling on
the ground tactics. This is what they are made of and this incident adds more credence to the pool. They have evolved into something less than moral. The GOP, the talk show nuts, the corporations that sleep with them, all scratching the soil beneath them with their bellies. They have become despicable.