

Obama approves \$558M drought relief package

By **TIM HEARDEN**
Capital Press

SACRAMENTO — President Barack Obama's approval of a compromise water resources bill that includes \$558 million for California drought relief was met with cheers from growers and concerns among environmentalists.

Obama said in a signing message that the bill, which also includes \$170 million to address lead in the drinking water in Flint, Mich., advances vital projects to "restore watersheds, improve waterways and flood control and improve drinking water infrastructure."

The bill generated controversy when Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., agreed with Republicans in the House of Representatives on language easing some restrictions on pumping from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta and allowing the capture of more water during storms.

Western Growers, a staunch advocate for the bill, asserted that its signing on Dec. 16 will bring aid to the businesses and individuals that have been devastated by drought and federal water cutbacks.

The legislation "is the product of bipartisan, bicameral negotiations that provide temporary improvements to the operations of the Delta pumping plants while maintaining the integrity of the Endangered Species Act," Tom Nassif, the group's president and chief executive officer, said in a statement.

"With California's winter rainy season already upon us, it (is) critical that we not prevent the reasonable diversion of all available runoff to storage," he said.

Nassif praised "three years of hard work" by Feinstein, House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy and other members of the California delegation.

But the environmental group Restore the Delta argued that Feinstein and McCarthy, R-Calif., "hijacked" the water resources bill with a last-minute "rider" at the request of San Joaquin Valley agricultural interests. The group sided with Sen. Barbara Boxer, who last week called the rider a "devastating maneuver" and

a "poison pill" designed to undermine the Endangered Species Act by changing restrictions on the amount and time that water could be delivered to valley agricultural districts.

In a letter urging Obama to veto the bill, Restore the Delta executive director Barbara Barrigan-Parilla said the rider "will worsen water quality not only for San Francisco Bay-Delta fisheries, but for the hundreds of thousands of people who make up the Delta's environmental justice communities."

Obama said he expects water regulators to continue to operate within the Endangered Species Act's constraints.

"It is essential that it not be undermined by anyone who seeks to override that balance (between competing water needs) by misstating or incorrectly reading the provisions" of the bill, the president said in his signing statement. He said he expects agencies to "assure that state water quality standards are met."

The bill included funding authorization for 137 projects identified by Feinstein in a drought bill earlier this year. Included is authorization for the proposed Sites Reservoir, which will seek state Proposition 1 bond funds next year.

Among the bill's short-term provisions is daily monitoring for fish near the pumps to allow for more pumping when fish aren't in danger, allowing agencies to capture more water during storms and requiring agencies to explain why pumping is reduced to lower levels than allowed by the biological opinions for salmon and Delta smelt.

Rep. Doug LaMalfa, R-Calif., a House Agriculture Committee member, has praised the bill's "iron-clad protections" for Northern California's senior water rights as well as a provision assuring less senior northern water right holders that they would receive at least half their normal allocations even in droughts.

The bill's approval comes after two previous failed proposals, including last year, when months of meetings between Feinstein and House Republicans couldn't produce a compromise.

EcoFarm Conference to encourage diversity

By **TIM HEARDEN**
Capital Press

PACIFIC GROVE, Calif. — Encouraging diversity among growers as well as crops will be a theme of this winter's 37th annual EcoFarm Conference Jan. 25-28 at the Asilomar Conference Grounds.

The Ecological Farming Association's annual gathering will put a big emphasis on urban farming and encouraging people from underrepresented communities to get involved in agriculture, spokeswoman Deborah Yashar said.

With the theme "Cultivating Diversity," the conference will include keynote speakers such as Malik Kenyatta Yakini, who leads the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network, who will speak about "food justice," organizers said.

Crop diversity will also be covered, as keynote speaker Matthew Dillon of Emeryville, Calif.-based Clif Bar and Co. will discuss a company initiative called "Seed Matters."

"Diversity means lots of things," Yashar said. "We're making a point to encompass diversity in agriculture in not just plants and bugs but people, too. ... We'll be talking about farmworkers and bringing them in to speak."

Among the dozens of workshops offered will be ones with the titles "Growing the Next Generation of Farmers of Color" "Fair Food: Exploring the



Courtesy of Trav Williams/Broken Banjo Photography

Bus tour participants examine the soil and irrigation system at a strawberry farm on the Central California coast as part of last year's EcoFarm Conference in Pacific Grove, Calif. Registration is open for the 2017 conference, which is Jan. 25-28.

Online

EcoFarm Conference: <https://eco-farm.org/conference>

Inequities and Racial Issues Inherent in the Farming Movement," and "Out Here: Queer Farmers in the U.S."

One of the main points will be encouraging young people in urban settings to consider farming, Yashar said.

"They are some of the farmers of tomorrow — our youth and people in urban areas who don't necessarily have access to the expensive land in California," she said.

"That's one of the things that makes EcoFarm unique. It's not just one sector."

Farmers, marketers, activists, educators and others attend the yearly conference, one of the West's largest for organic and environmentally conscious producers. While the first gathering drew only about 50 people, about 2,000 now attend the conference and it has grown every year, organizers say.

Preceding the conference's main schedule will be the annual bus tour of organic agriculture in the Salinas Valley, a two-day course on "Sustainable Business Skills for

Sustainable Agriculture" and a symposium on creating new vegetable varieties to fill seasonal gaps.

The Ecological Farming Association, or EcoFarm, is a nonprofit educational organization founded in 1981. The group gets funding through various activities and projects, donations, grants, memberships and business sponsorships, according to its website.

At the heart of the group's calendar is the conference, which also features tastings of local wine and beer, live entertainment and an exhibitor marketplace.

Delta fixes a key requirement for Proposition 1 reservoir funds

By **TIM HEARDEN**
Capital Press

SACRAMENTO — Final ground rules for applying for Proposition 1 water bond funds for large storage projects place a big emphasis on how much they'll help the beleaguered Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.

The California Water Commission on Dec. 14 adopted regulations for handing out the \$2.7 billion for reservoirs and other storage projects set aside in the \$7.5 billion ballot measure approved by voters in 2014.

The commission made few changes from a final draft sent out for public comment in late November, assuring that projects will be graded largely on their role in improving flows and water quality in the Delta.

At least half of the bond funds given to a project would need to go toward ecosystem improvements directly related to the Delta, commission spokesman Chris Orrock says.

"We're excited that we got these regulations adopted when we did," Orrock said after the commission's 8-0 vote, noting the panel faced a statutory deadline of Dec. 15.

The guidelines have been sent to the state Office of Administrative Law, which has 30 days to approve them and make them official.

The next step for the water commission will be to start accepting applications for funding, which it will do in the first half of 2017. The panel will determine the eligibility of projects and prioritize them late next year and likely determine funding sometime in 2018, Orrock said.

The commission's emphasis on helping the Delta comes as the 1,150-square-mile labyrinth of islands and shallow waterways faces a slew of environmental problems, including pollution, silting, invasive plant species and saltwater intrusion.

Projects can benefit the Delta by providing more cold water that would aid the salmon run while flushing out pollutants and intruding saltwater, Orrock has said.

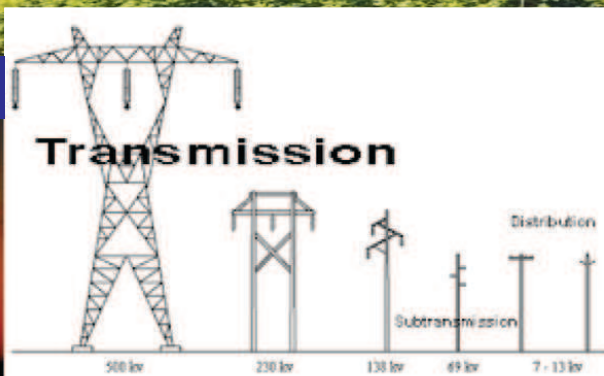
Among anticipated suitors are backers of the proposed \$3.6 billion Sites Reservoir near Maxwell, who have lined up 34 agency participants, and supporters of the proposed \$2.5 billion Temperance Flat Reservoir near Fresno. Others could include sponsors of the planned expansion of the Los Vaqueros Reservoir in Contra Costa County as well as groundwater improvement projects near Delta tributaries.

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