



Lift water restrictions, Southern California lawmakers tell Congress

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WASHINGTON - With California in the throes of drought, Congress must act quickly to ease federal pumping restrictions that are negatively affecting the state's already shrinking water supply, Inland Rep. Ken Calvert testified Tuesday.

Calvert, R-Corona, was among a handful of California Republicans who spoke out in favor of easing the restrictions.

Pumps in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, the core of the state's water system, have been virtually halted under a federal ruling to protect threatened and endangered fish species, including the Delta smelt. The tiny silver smelt, found only in that estuary, are sucked into the powerful pumps that move water uphill into canals that carry it south.

Federal scientists say the smelt, believed to be an indicator of the overall health of the Delta, are close to extinction.

Calvert and other House Republicans said the restrictions amount to the federal government putting the well-being of fish before people, who are suffering from the affects of a third consecutive year of drought in the Golden State.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger on Feb. 27 declared a statewide emergency due to drought and warned of the possibility of water rationing. Meanwhile, recent estimates show that about 250,000 acre-feet -- more than 83 billion gallons -- of water have been lost to the Pacific Ocean because of the smelt ruling, Calvert said.

"Absent the federal restrictions, the quarter-million acre-feet of water could have been exported to water users throughout the state," Calvert said. "This is enough water to meet the water needs of half a million people for a year."

Calvert made his remarks during a House Natural Resources Committee hearing to address the state's drought.

Democrats, who control Congress, appeared unlikely to lift the restrictions, which were grounded in the Endangered Species Act.

Instead, the panel's Democrats pressed for a multifaceted strategy to combat the drought through water recycling, desalination and better water-storage programs.

"We must look toward a comprehensive solution," said Rep. Joe Baca, D-Rialto. "We're at a critical time right now with the drought. We have to look at the effect it's having on California right now . . . and especially the Inland Empire."

Still, Calvert and others said turning the pumps back on is a needed short-term solution for a problem that is only getting worse.

He said water rationing will probably occur, and that will drive up the cost of water at a time when the state and national economies are already in crisis.

"Folks, get ready, your water prices are going to skyrocket," Calvert told reporters before the hearing.

To drive home their point, the Republican witnesses at the hearing -- who included Reps. Devin Nunes, R-Visalia, George Radonovich, R-Fresno, and Wally Herger, R-Chico -- brought with them a fishbowl containing several Delta smelt and placed it on the table during the hearing.

As he finished his testimony, Nunes said he wanted to submit the fish for the official record.

"You can have them, we don't want them," Nunes told Rep. Grace Napolitano, D-Santa Fe Springs, who headed the meeting.

Napolitano responded, "Thank you for your testimony, and I suggest you take the cover off so they can get some air."

Staff writer Janet Zimmerman contributed to this report.