



Pending federal legislation could yield more than USD 1.3bn for drought impacted California water agencies

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A bill that could increase federal investment in water system projects in **California** tenfold is set to be heard by the US Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee in late September or early October, according to a spokesperson for the committee.

The bill, the California Emergency Drought Relief Act ([S 1894](#)) or “a bill to provide short-term water supplies to drought-stricken California” was co-sponsored by Senators Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) and Barbara Boxer (D-CA), according to a press release from Feinstein. The bill allocates its USD 1.3bn among a variety of long-term fixes, including USD 600m for storage, USD 200m for loan guarantees, USD 200m for water recycling and USD 50m for desalination, according to analysis of the bill by *Debtwire Municipal*.

If S 1894 passes it would be a huge increase in federal financial support for water system improvements, said Ellen Hanak, a senior fellow at the Public Policy Institute of California.

“If you look at what the feds have already put toward drought relief funding for California - up until now most of what they’ve done has been the emergency relief type of funding,” Hanak said. “What this bill does is it basically multiplies by a factor of 10 or more the water system investments.”

The federal government has invested about USD 78m since the start of the drought, in 2011, in job training, food, housing and rental reductions for people effected by the drought. However it has only pledged USD 104m in water systems investments including recycled water and efficiencies, Hanak said.

The State of California has spent more than USD 3.0bn on drought costs, about 87% of that or USD 2.6bn has been invested in infrastructure, Hanak said.

“It’s very similar in spirit to the things the state is also supporting,” Hanak said.

The infrastructure funds would be available to other drought-impacted western states, said Tom Mentzer, a spokesperson for Feinstein.

This would be consistent with how other federal programs have been run, including relief for livestock producers for higher feed costs from the United States Department of Agriculture, which resulted in California recipients getting USD 250m since the start of the drought, Hanak said.

Feinstein and Boxer’s bill is not the only federal-level bill that could effect the California drought.

Boxer has also introduced the Drought Recovery and Resilience Act of 2015 ([S 1837](#)) which is waiting to be heard by the Senate Finance Committee, as its related bill, [HR 2983](#), sponsored by Representative Jared Huffman (D-CA) with 37 co-sponsors, also awaits hearings from a variety of committees including the House Energy and Commerce Committee and the House Natural Resources Committee. These bills also focus on water infrastructure including water recycling, water capture and desalination, according to analysis of the bill by *Debtwire Municipal*.

One drought bill that has made it further than committee hearings, the Western Water and American Food Security Act of 2015 ([HR 2898](#)) is sponsored by Representative David Valadao (R-CA) and was passed by the House on 16 July. The bill focuses on environmental concerns, streamlining permitting processes, regulations and water rights, according to analysis of the bill by *Debtwire Municipal*.

Elected officials with the exception of Feinstein did not respond to request for comment.

by Maryellen Tighe