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The western United States is experiencing a historically persistent drought. In California, the lack of water has had a devastating impact on the state's environmental health and economic growth, leading California Governor Jerry Brown to issue a State of Emergency for the fourth consecutive year. Record-low levels of reservoir and aquifer recharge have forced farmers across the state to fallow their fields, and the dry conditions have only increased the risk for catastrophic wildfires. California has also reported that the number of dry wells throughout the state is growing, with more than 1,988 in the Central Valley alone.

Given these conditions, how are legislators responding to this historic drought?

Two bills are currently being considered at the federal level to tackle drought conditions across the West: the Western Water and American Food Security Act (H.R. 2898) and the California Emergency Drought Relief Act (S. 1894). Both bills address drought-stricken regions in California: the Central Valley Project (CVP), a water management project in northern California, and the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

H.R. 2898 introduced by Rep. David Valadao (R-CA) advocates for water management strategies that favor agricultural and civic water rights across California while limiting negative impacts on native fish species. The bill allows for agricultural water allocations to remain within previously designated levels and provides funds for the construction and enhancement of surface water storage facilities. The bill also requires the U.S. Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, and the Interior to expedite approval of mitigation and water-use projects requested by California state and local governments.

S. 1894 introduced by Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) supports projects for emergency drought relief, long-term water supply, and local drought resiliency. In addition to ensuring federal support for water recycling and desalination projects in the state, the bill authorizes funding for multiple water storage projects such as enlarging dams and reservoirs and requires the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to set aside funds for future emergency drought declarations. Feinstein's bill would also support research and monitoring efforts. The bill requires the Secretaries of the Interior and Commerce to implement strategies to monitor turbidity and flow of local rivers and establishes a WaterSense Program within EPA to identify and promote water efficient products, building, landscapes, facilities, processes and services via a "WaterSense" label. It also establishes an "Open Water Data System" within the U.S. Geological Survey to provide an open exchange of water data for management purposes.

The proposed bills, however, still have a long way to go before they can become law. Although H.R. 2898 has been approved by the House, it still needs to be considered in the Senate; its likely companion bill, S. 1894, still has to be approved by the Senate before it can be considered in the House or go to conference. In addition, many other water legislation bills have been introduced throughout the this Congress to address the drought, including the New Mexico Preparedness Act of 2015 (S. 1936) and the Land and Water Conservation Authorization and Funding Act of 2015 (S. 890) among others.

In the meantime, California state and local governments have pushed for their own regulatory changes at the state level to mitigate the drought's devastating impacts. For example, the California Department of Food and Agriculture has put forth a plan to help farmers implement on-farm irrigation systems, and the Department of Water Resources has established draft regulations to provide a process for local agencies to modify the boundaries of groundwater basins. In addition, Gov. Brown has approved legislation that prohibits and fines cities and counties for using water resources in unbeneficial ways, such as watering private lawns. California citizens are also trying to help by decreasing the number of private swimming pools throughout the state.

As the drought persists throughout the western United States, geoscientists are providing federal, state, and local communities with the information they need to assess water quality and quantity now and in the future. There are many efforts at the federal and local level to help alleviate the impacts from drought; for more information please visit the U.S. Geological Survey website at <https://www.usgs.gov/water/>.

