

Congressman Would Ban California Water Tunnel Lawsuits

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SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — A California congressman wants to ban environmental lawsuits challenging a plan to build two gigantic tunnels to divert water from the north to the thirsty south.

Rep. Ken Calvert, a Riverside County Republican, inserted the ban in a 142-page draft of an Interior Department spending bill for fiscal 2019 that he released Tuesday, the Sacramento Bee reported.

Calvert chairs the House Appropriations subcommittee on the Interior, Environment and Related Agencies.

Page 141 of the draft includes language prohibiting state or federal lawsuits against the final environmental impact report for the so-called California WaterFix project "and any resulting decision, record of decision or similar determination."

If that provision makes it through Congress, it would gut many existing legal challenges that are based on environmental findings and bar future similar lawsuits.

The WaterFix project, championed by Gov. Jerry Brown, would create two 35-mile (56-kilometer) tunnels to ferry water from the Sacramento River to south-supplying aqueducts.

Brown argues that the tunnels will ensure water flows to the farm-rich Central Valley, the San Francisco Bay Area, the San Joaquin Valley and teeming Southern California urban areas.

Water districts and farming interests support the plan. Last month, the giant Metropolitan Water District in Southern California agreed to contribute nearly \$11 billion of the estimated \$17 billion construction costs.

Brown has argued the tunnels will help protect endangered species of fish but environmental groups worry that they will harm fish ecosystems.

Environmental groups and Sacramento-area local governments have filed more than a dozen lawsuits over the years in a bid to halt the project and Calvert said enough is enough.

"After more than a decade of studies and more than 50,000 pages of environmental documents, all of the project's stakeholders have had a plethora of opportunities to express their thoughts and concerns," Calvert said in a statement. "We must move forward with the project. It's long past time to give Californians the reliable water system they deserve."

Opponents accused him of trying to silence the opposition.

"Regardless of how anyone feels about the Delta tunnels, this piece of legislation sets a dangerous precedent for California," Barbara Barrigan-Parrilla, executive director of Restore the Delta. "It's an end run around due process and really upends states' rights."

