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Second House panel backs water accord

By Herbert A. Sample and Michael Doyle
Bee Washington Bureau
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WASHINGTON -- Rep. John Doolittle and four other Sacramento area congressmen won round two Thursday in their effort to improve flood protection and water supplies for their region.

But even as Sacramento officials celebrated the first significant advance in the House of a comprehensive flood-control plan for Sacramento since 1992, resistance was stiffening to the water-supply provisions among the governor, the state's two U.S. senators, and House members from the Bay Area and Central Valley.

And Doolittle, a Rocklin Republican, was acknowledging that some of the concerns critics were expressing were justified.

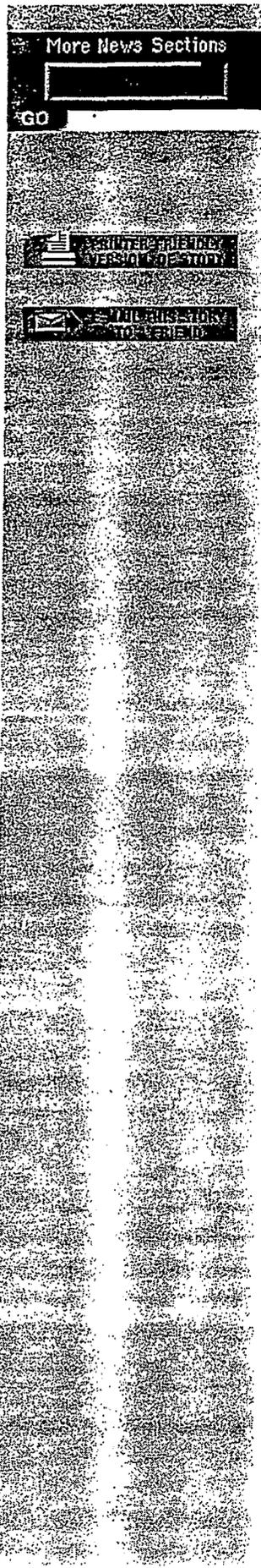
The congressman said he would seek to "refine" the proposal to address fears that new water diversion facilities on the Sacramento and American rivers would reduce water to farmers in the San Joaquin Valley and urban users in the Bay Area.

His remarks highlighted the complexity and political sensitivity of the water-supply half of a compromise reached last week by Doolittle, Democratic Rep. Robert Matsui of Sacramento and GOP Reps. Wally Herger of Marysville, Doug Ose of Sacramento and Richard Pombo of Tracy.

Just arriving at an accord gave the green light to the House Water Resources and Environment Subcommittee on Wednesday, and the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee on Thursday, to approve a \$2.9 billion omnibus water resources development bill. Both panels were stymied last year by disagreements between Matsui and Doolittle about how best to improve Sacramento's flood protection.

The Transportation Committee passed the measure 49-24, with eight Democrats joining the panel's Republicans in support. It is scheduled to be considered on the House floor on Wednesday.

The legislation includes \$345 million worth of flood control projects for Sacramento, including authorizations to increase the height of Folsom Dam by 6 1/2 feet, punch additional outlets in its face, make minor improvements to American River levees and construct a bridge to



replace Folsom Dam Road along the top of the facility.

That plan is linked to \$288 million in projects to divert water from the Sacramento and American rivers and transport it to water districts in Placer, El Dorado, San Joaquin and southern Sacramento counties.

That worries other California politicians from both political parties. Representatives from the Fresno and Modesto areas, for example, said the water supply language caught them by surprise, forcing them to scramble all week to fend it off or change it.

Thursday afternoon, key House staffers were meeting again to try to resolve the concerns.

Democratic Rep. Gary Condit of Ceres said Wednesday's amendment by the water resources subcommittee eliminating language guaranteeing water rights to Sacramento area water agencies was insufficient.

"We're not sure Mr. Doolittle and Mr. Matsui understand the impact to our region," Condit said. The amendment "does not take care of the problem."

"What (Doolittle) has inserted is very, very irresponsible," said Rep. Calvin Dooley, D-Tulare County. Barring a resolution, he said, he would seek to delete the water supply language from the bill on the House floor.

A Central Valley Republican, Rep. George Radanovich of Mariposa, voiced concerns of the Westlands Water District, which serves 600,000 acres of farmland west of Fresno and has been negotiating with Doolittle for weeks.

An aide said Radanovich declined to sign a letter from Dooley and Condit expressing opposition to the Doolittle language because of its "partisan cast." Nonetheless, Radanovich pronounced himself opposed to the water supply language as approved Thursday by the Transportation Committee.

Addressing another aspect of the controversy, Rep. Ellen Tauscher, D-Pleasanton, said the water supply provisions "throw a hand grenade in the middle" of the CalFed process, a state-federal team seeking to increase water supplies and restore Central Valley rivers, and the Sacramento Water Forum, a regional group charting future water needs along the lower American River.

She was circulating a letter among California House members opposed to the provision.

Furthermore, Sen. Dianne Feinstein announced her opposition to the water supply plan Thursday. Sen. Barbara Boxer and Gov. Gray Davis

didn't go that far, but both urged the House to defer further action until the CalFed and water forum talks conclude.

During Thursday's hearing, Rep. Sherwood Boehlert, R-N.Y., and other Transportation Committee leaders stressed that Wednesday's amendment eliminated any impact on California water rights and gave no water agency an advantage over others.

All the amendment would do, Boehlert insisted, is let the federal government help finance pumps, pipelines and other equipment needed to divert river water.

Two California Republicans on the committee, Reps. Steve Horn of Long Beach and Steven Kuykendall of Rancho Palos Verdes, agreed. Kuykendall said concerns about the impact on state water laws were "a red herring."

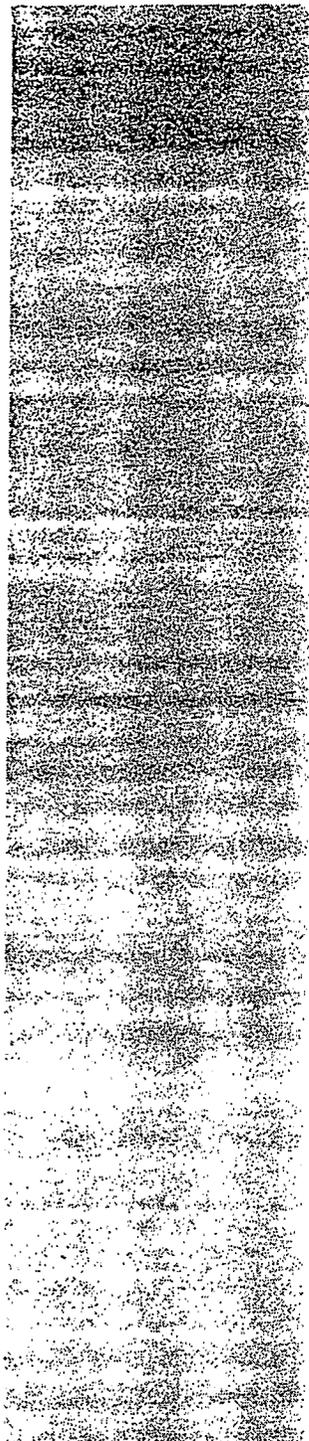
But Doolittle contended that Boehlert's amendment had, unintentionally, removed protections for downstream users.

Doolittle supported Boehlert's proposal. The Rocklin lawmaker conceded, however, that he had not focused on state "area of origin" laws or how those statutes could be used by Sacramento area water agencies once the diversion facilities were constructed.

"If you're a county of origin and you have the infrastructure, you can go (to the State Water Resources Control Board) for a county of origin (water) right," he said. Placer County, for one, is designated as a county of origin.

Doolittle also contended a 1992 law reserving 800,000 acre-feet of Central Valley Project water for environmental purposes resulted in cutbacks to other water districts. Those agencies, he said, have become "extremely defensive" about any other major changes to the state's water system -- including his proposals.

Doolittle's remarks prompted Tauscher to emphasize that two House committees had drafted and approved major changes in California's water priorities without much insight.





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