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U.S. Senate's failed water amendment roils California alliances

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WASHINGTON – A Central Valley water amendment that failed Tuesday night in the Senate nonetheless succeeded in driving a wedge between Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein and some key California farmers.

Not to mention between Feinstein and Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Visalia.

The amendment to a $32 billion Interior Department funding bill would have overturned two federal agency decisions and temporarily restored Valley irrigation deliveries. The Senate rejected the amendment by a largely party-line 61-36 margin.

Realistically, there was little chance the Senate would ever accept the amendment offered by a conservative South Carolina lawmaker with zero experience in California water policy. Politically, though, the ambush amendment could have lasting consequences.

"It was something of a Hail Mary," Andrew House, spokesman for Nunes, acknowledged Wednesday. Nunes did not write the amendment offered by Republican Sen. Jim DeMint of South Carolina.

In the wake of its defeat, Nunes has been seeking maximum partisan advantage, saying, "California farmers (were) again denied water, this time by Senators Feinstein and (Barbara) Boxer."

In turn, Feinstein's spokesman, Gil Duran, on Wednesday denounced the water amendment as a stunt. He added that Feinstein has asked that the nonpartisan National Academy of Sciences undertake an independent review of two biological opinions. Feinstein accompanied her written request with a letter from wealthy Southern California businessman Stewart Resnick, who owns farm operations in the southern San Joaquin Valley.

The immediate dispute revolves around two biological opinions that federal resource agencies are using to guide protections for the Delta and various vulnerable species including salmon and the Delta smelt. Together, state officials estimate the two biological opinions issued by the Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service could result in water delivery cuts of about 30 percent.

In the House, Nunes failed in multiple efforts to block funding for the biological opinions. His vehemence eventually turned off Democrats who had previously backed him on the water issue, including Rep. Dennis Cardoza, D-Merced.

"This is baloney, to be doing this sort of thing," Cardoza said in July of Nunes' repeated water amendment efforts. "I have had a number of my colleagues tell me they are fed up with it."

Starting last week, House indicated, Nunes quietly helped orchestrate the surprise amendment offered

Tuesday by DeMint. Nunes had previously helped persuade Fox News Channel commentator Sean Hannity to do an hour-long special on the Valley's water woes, and House said the television special aired last week "elevated the attention" given to the region.

Feinstein was managing the Interior Department bill on the Senate floor late Tuesday afternoon when DeMint first advised her of the California water amendment.

The unexpected amendment concerning her home state clearly upset Feinstein, who called the effort "a kind of Pearl Harbor on everything we are trying to do" with California water.

DeMint, though, could furnish letters in support of the water amendment signed by Westlands Water District, the California Farm Bureau Federation, the Western Growers Association and the California Grape and Tree Fruit League, among others. Westlands, whose leaders had publicly lauded Feinstein's water efforts during a meeting in August, actively solicited support for the amendment Tuesday.

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