4 Dems author bill for Calif. water problems

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By Pablo Lopez / The Fresno Bee

A bill introduced Wednesday in Washington, D.C., was touted by its Democrat authors as a way to help solve the San Joaquin Valley's water problems.

But a spokeswoman for Westlands Water District called it a Band-Aid for the state's water crisis.

Reps. Jim Costa of Fresno and Dennis Cardoza of Merced and California Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer joined together to introduce the Water Transfer Facilitation Act of 2009.

The lawmakers say the bill would make it easier for the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation to approve transfers between water sellers and buyers in the Valley.

Also, the bill requires only one environmental study to examine the effect of water transfers on the giant garter snake, a protected species. Currently, each water-transfer project requires a separate study.

According to Costa, the bill has been endorsed by 14 water users including the Metropolitan Water District (the Southern California urban water giant), the Friant Water Users Authority and Westlands Water District.

Sarah Woolf, spokeswoman for Westlands, which spans 600,000 acres from Firebaugh to Kettleman City, said the bill is a good idea, but it won't fix the state's water shortage.

Three years of below-normal precipitation combined with court-ordered restrictions on pumping water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta are the leading causes of the shortage.

"This bill will be an intermediate fix, a Band-Aid," Woolf said.

Westlands needs the water because the district received 10% of its allocations this year. The drought, combined with court-ordered water restrictions, have caused more than 150,000 acres of Westlands acres not to be farmed, Woolf said.

Woolf said the state's problem is this: There's an abundance of water north of the delta, but it is difficult to deliver the water to the areas that need it south of the delta. The new bill will eliminate some of the bureaucratic hurdles to water transfers, she said.