

RULES, MONEY BLOCKING DAM PROJECTS, OFFICIALS SAY

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SAN ANDREAS - Congressman Tom McClintock, R-Granite Bay, is calling for relaxation of "1970s-era" environmental laws that he says are blocking construction of much-needed dams in California and throughout the western United States.

McClintock represents the 4th Congressional District that was redrawn last year to include Amador, Calaveras and Tuolumne counties. He noted that most major dams in the region and in the Western U.S. were built more than 50 years ago.

He is also chairman of the House Resources Subcommittee on Water and Power that held an oversight hearing Tuesday in Washington at which representatives of western farmers and some water agencies said they agree that easing environmental rules could get dams built.

Others at the hearing, however, said coming up with money is a bigger hurdle than environmental rules, and appropriate and cost-effective water supply and storage projects still are being built in California.

Jerry D. Brown, general manager of Contra Costa Water District, said his agency was able to comply with environmental regulations to build Los Vaqueros Reservoir in the late 1990s and do an expansion of Los Vaqueros, which is now in construction.

And he noted that Contra Costa Water District is cooperating with East Bay Municipal Utility District to use Los Vaqueros as an alternative to a controversial expansion of Pardee Reservoir on the Mokelumne River.

Fellow Water and Power Subcommittee members John Garamendi, D-Elk Grove, and Grace Napolitano, D-Norwalk, both said it is high cost that is the barrier to building dams in California.

"Four billion dollars and you can build some nice dams in California," Garamendi said. "Do you have four billion dollars lying around?"

That prompted McClintock to respond just before he closed the hearing. "Regulatory excesses are actively blocking projects even when they are funded."

Environmental regulations last year helped push East Bay Municipal Utility District to reconsider its proposal to raise Pardee Dam as a way to increase water supply. Environmental groups won a legal ruling forcing the district to study some of the impacts of the proposal.

After that, East Bay MUD officials decided instead to cooperate on the Los Vaqueros project.

Katherine Evatt, president of the Foothill Conservancy, said that ultimately she believes environmental laws did EBMUD ratepayers a favor by prompting the agency to abandon an excessively expensive project.

"The cheapest water in California is the water you save through conservation," Evatt said.

During Tuesday's hearing, Michael Gabaldon, director of technical resources for Bureau of Reclamation, offered similar observations on why few new dams are built now.

"Most of the easy projects were built a long time ago," Gabaldon said, referring the best locations for dams.

Later in the hearing, McClintock scolded Gabaldon, noting that the Bureau of Reclamation is studying about 19 potential water storage projects.

"You are now spending absolutely no time or funding to actually construct these facilities," McClintock said.

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