



House of Representatives Approves Bill to Allow Review of Lake McClure Spillway Modification

Senate Action Necessary before Design and Environmental Review of Water Storage Project can Begin

For Immediate Release: June 19, 2012

Contact: Mike Jensen

209-354-2856

mjensen@mercedid.org

WASHINGTON, DC – Significant legislation that could pave the way for an increase in the storage capacity of Lake McClure passed the U.S. House of Representatives today. The legislation was introduced by Rep. Jeff Denham, R-Turlock.

“This is a good day for Merced growers as well as all who enjoy recreation on Lake McClure,” said MID Board President Suzy Hultgren. “We are grateful for all of the support we have received from our Valley legislators, local government and the community.”

During debate on the House floor today, Rep. Denham called the legislation, H.R. 2578, the type of bipartisan effort needed to “find solutions to the storage, conveyance and regulatory problems” contributing to the significant water shortages in the San Joaquin Valley. The bill was cosponsored by Rep. Dennis Cardoza, D-Merced; Jim Costa, D-Fresno; Kevin McCarthy, R-Bakersfield; and Devin Nunes, R-Visalia. Rep. Cardoza called the bill “a common-sense approach.”

Merced Irrigation District is currently involved in a long, complex process of relicensing its Merced River Hydroelectric Project – which includes Lake McClure and New Exchequer Dam – with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC). Operated by MID, Lake McClure provides irrigation water to approximately 2,200 farmers. Up to 100 megawatts of electricity are produced through hydroelectric generation on the reservoir’s New Exchequer Dam.

MID is considering a project to raise the spillway on Lake McClure by up to 10 feet. The modification would allow MID to capture up to an additional 70,000 acre feet of water during wet years.

The spillway modifications would cause temporary increases in water levels in approximately 1,800 feet of the Merced River where it joins Lake McClure. These increases would occur about once every three years and last only between two and eight weeks.

That section of river is currently part of MID's existing hydroelectric boundary as defined by FERC. However, that same boundary has subsequently been overlapped by the Wild and Scenic River designation. That in turn has prevented MID from formally proposing any increased storage in Lake McClure. The legislation passed today would allow MID to formally submit the proposed project for consideration by FERC.

The bill does not authorize the spillway project to be built. It simply allows MID to submit the proposed project to FERC and for the federal commission to consider it for approval. Such consideration by FERC would require significant environmental review, including a robust open, public dialogue on the merits of the project. To become law, the legislation still must be considered by the U.S. Senate. The legislation requests no federal or state funds for the spillway modification.

"This is a significant milestone in the effort to enhance our local water supplies," said Bryan Kelly, MID Director of Regulatory Affairs. "However, there is still much more work to be done."

Kelly said that MID recognizes that conservation groups are concerned about altering Wild and Scenic boundaries.

"We take those concerns seriously," he said.

"We're discussing ways to address them in a manner that would allow the spillway project to get a fair hearing before FERC. The Wild and Scenic protections for 122 miles of Merced River have helped to ensure that MID's water source is one of the most pristine in California. The half-mile boundary change made by the legislation will not diminish those protections."

If the spillway improvement project were to be built, it would provide a host of benefits. Among them is decreasing the demand on groundwater pumping. It would also provide approximately 10,000 new megawatt hours per year of renewable energy. The additional storage space would provide critical water supply relief in dry years.

For instance, in 2011 MID released approximately 1 million acre feet of water from Lake McClure into the Merced River as a result of heavy inflow from a large snow melt. Those "flood releases" provided no beneficial use to growers. Essentially the reservoir was drained and refilled. However, this year MID is in a critically dry year. Had the spillway project been in place in 2011, MID would have been able to carry over an additional 70,000 acre feet of water into the 2012 irrigation season. That additional water would have drastically decreased pressure on MID's supplies.

"Our citizens have been clamoring for increased water storage and we have cleared a significant hurdle with the passage of this bill through the House today," said MID Board Vice President Wil Hunter. "I am proud to have worked on this diligently during my tenure on the MID Board. The citizens of Merced County will benefit greatly and this is a proud day for them."

For more information, please visit <http://www.mercedid.org/spillwayproject>

###