



Federal legislation helps to advance Lake McClure Storage Enhancement

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A bipartisan group of California Members of Congress has introduced legislation, H.R. 5726, that represents a critical step toward Merced Irrigation District's (MID) goals of enhancing storage capacity at Lake McClure. The legislation was authored and introduced by Merced-area Rep. Jim Costa and was co-sponsored by local Reps. Jeff Denham (R) and Tom McClintock (R), together with Davis-area Member John Garamendi (D).

The legislation would authorize the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) to accept funding from the owners of non-federal reservoir projects in order to review and revise reservoir operation manuals, including flood-control criteria. The legislation does not direct an outcome for the review. Rather, it allows a thorough review of the project and its merits while taking into account new data and information related to the reservoir's operations.

The USACE is required to regularly review and update the operations manuals for the federal and non-federal reservoirs that it regulates. However, budget constraints prevent the USACE from carrying out this responsibility. The operations manual for Lake McClure has not been significantly updated for more than 30 years. Modernization of the Lake McClure manual is necessary for advancement of MID's plan to raise the spillways on Exchequer Dam to create additional water storage capacity.

The USACE can accept non-federal funding for manual reviews for its own projects, but not for locally owned projects like Lake McClure. The legislation would allow the USACE to accept funding from the owners of non-federal reservoirs to pay for the public process of reviewing and updating operations manuals. Allowing non-federal owners to fund the process would clear the main hurdle to timely review and updating of reservoir operations nationwide.

"This bipartisan legislation is a crucial step for MID's efforts related to the New Exchequer Storage Enhancement Project," said Hicham ElTal, MID Deputy General Manager of Water Supply and Rights. ElTal is the lead MID engineer overseeing the New Exchequer spillway effort. "The Army Corps can't afford to review our project – and it can't let Merced pay for the review – so we have not been able to move forward. This bill will solve that problem."

EITal added: “Although much more work remains, this legislation is the key to beginning the review process. It will be of tremendous benefit to MID.”

MID has pursued the proposed project to enhance water storage at MID-owned Lake McClure for several years. The reservoir, located in Mariposa County, has a water storage capacity of approximately 1 million acre feet of water. The water benefits local agriculture and the local environment. Further, it helps replenish groundwater, and protects local groundwater quality – which is depended upon by numerous cities in eastern Merced County.

The storage enhancement project has two components:

- A physical modification of the existing spillways at Lake McClure; and
- An update of the USACE flood control manual for Lake McClure, taking into consideration new watershed data and science that has become available since the original manual was published more the 30 years ago.

The proposed project would allow for up to an additional 57,000 acre feet of carryover water storage.

In order for the project to proceed, the USACE operations manual for Lake McClure would have to be reviewed and new data and information taken into account. The District has offered to pay the costs associated with USACE review and revision of the Lake McClure manual. However, the Corps has said that it cannot accept non-federal funding for this purpose without statutory authorization. Should the legislation by Rep. Costa and the other local Members of Congress become law, MID would be allowed to contribute the funds required to pay for the manual review.

“We are extremely grateful to Rep. Costa and his staff for their ongoing hard work on this important infrastructure proposal,” said MID’s Hicham EITal. “And we greatly appreciate the bipartisan support by Reps. Denham and McClintock, who have worked to advance the Exchequer project for several years.

EITal also expressed appreciation for the efforts of Sen. Kamala Harris and Dianne Feinstein to have similar legislation included in the recently introduced Senate version of the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA).

“MID will continue to offer any and all support to Rep. Costa and the California Delegation on this matter,” said EITal.

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