

STRIPPING PROTECTIONS FOR CALIFORNIA'S FISH, WILDLIFE AND RIVERS

Passed 230-190

SUMMARY:

The House passed a bill that would severely weaken and override Endangered Species Act (ESA) protections for salmon and other endangered fish in California's Bay-Delta estuary, threaten life-giving water deliveries to wildlife refuges, effectively repeal the San Joaquin River Restoration Program, preempt state conservation laws, and weaken permitting requirements for new dams in the western United States. (*July 12, 2017, Roll Call No. 352*).

BACKGROUND:

California has just emerged from a devastating drought, and the state is taking proactive steps to protect cities, farms and the environment from future dry spells. The drought created severe hardships for cities, rural communities, industries, agriculture and the state's diverse fish and wildlife and their habitats, especially in the San Francisco Bay-Delta estuary. The California Bay-Delta is the largest such ecosystem on the West Coast and provides habitat to 750 species of plants and animals. However, over the years, a vast network of reservoirs, canals and pumping stations has diverted the waters vital to this ecosystem to cities, farms and businesses—primarily in the arid central and southern parts of the state. More recently, the Bay-Delta has been governed by both state and federal laws and regulations that are intended to balance water supply for user groups with environmental protections. Opponents of these safeguards have made continued attempts to use the drought as an excuse to gut protections for fish and wildlife and give more water to corporate agribusinesses. Drought, not environmental laws, is the cause of low water supplies across California.

H.R. 23, the "Gaining Responsibility on Water Act," was introduced by Rep. David Valadao (R-Calif.). This controversial bill would undermine critical environmental protections to benefit selected California water users at the expense of all others. Rather than promoting collaborative solutions to create drought-resilient water supplies to benefit the environment and economy, this divisive bill would imperil wildlife, devastate the fishing industry, impair water quality and spawn decades of litigation. H.R. 23 would severely weaken and override protections for salmon and other native fish listed under the ESA in the Bay-Delta estuary and would prevent California from implementing and updating water quality standards that are critical to communities, farms, fish and wildlife. It also amends the landmark Central Valley Project Improvement Act to eliminate protections for salmon and other wildlife. These changes could devastate native fish and wildlife and the thousands of fishing jobs in California and Oregon that depend on them. The bill also could reduce water deliveries to national wildlife refuges and state wildlife management areas, devastating migratory bird populations and other species that depend on refuge habitats, which are essential because only 5 percent of California's Central Valley wetlands remain. H.R. 23 would effectively repeal the San Joaquin River Restoration Settlement Act, destroying native salmon runs and Central Valley farms, undoing a consensus agreement between conservationists and farmers that settled decades of litigation and leaving the San Joaquin River completely dry in most years. H.R. 23 would

preempt state law, prohibiting California from implementing its own environmental protections. Finally, the bill would authorize and short-circuit permitting for new dams, harming states and communities across the West.

OUTCOME:

On July 12, 2017, the House passed H.R. 23, 230-190. “No” was the pro-conservation vote.