San Joaquin Valley officials look for aid on Capitol Hill

By Michael Doyle

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Madera County Supervisor David Rogers, left, and Madera Mayor Robert Poythress discuss water issues with Sen. Dianne Feinstein on Wednesday in Washington, D.C.
PHOTO PROVIDED BY MADERA COUNTY SUPERVISOR DAVID ROGERS' STAFF

WASHINGTON — San Joaquin Valley officials are blitzing Capitol Hill this week in hopes of scoring some federal help.

The metaphor is mixed, but then so are the prospects for the 11 mayors, city council members and county supervisors, plus 16 staffers participating in this year's "Valley Voice" lobbying effort. The Valley team is seeking support for transportation and air quality initiatives from a Congress where seemingly little gets accomplished.

"Everyone is keenly aware of what needs to be done," Stanislaus County Supervisor Vito Chiesa said Wednesday. "They just need bipartisan support."

Chiesa and his colleagues are lobbying under the banner of the San Joaquin Valley Regional Policy Council, a coalition that includes regional planning organizations, as well as the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Individual counties undertook their own D.C. lobbying trips earlier this year, focusing on acutely local projects. This week's two-day swing that formally concludes Thursday uses similar techniques, including lots of meetings and an insider's boost from D.C. lobbyist Leonard S. Simon. But it focuses on broader priorities.

The transportation agenda includes obtaining federal dollars for Highway 99 and developing a long-term plan to keep the Highway Trust Fund solvent.

Earlier this summer, the House and Senate overcame hardcore conservative objections and passed an $11 billion patch that will keep the Highway Trust Fund solvent through next May. The last-minute, temporary fix was necessary because gas taxes no longer raise enough money for projections authorized by Congress, and a longer-term solution has proven elusive.

"One thing I've seen that's a little frustrating is the kicking of the can down the road as it comes to the Highway Trust Fund," said San Joaquin Mayor Amarpreet Dhaliwal. "It still needs more of a solution."

The Valley officials met late Wednesday morning with the staff of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, whose chairwoman, Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., is in the middle of the political gridlock over the trust fund.

Valley officials this week are also pushing for designation of the region as an "Air and Health Quality Empowerment Zone," which would make it eligible for additional federal clean-air funding. A bill to establish the zone, co-sponsored by California Democrats Jim Costa and Jerry McNerney, was introduced July 31, but it does not have much momentum. Similar bills since 2010 went nowhere.

The Valley officials back several other measures as well, including one that could help relieve the region from attaining air quality standards during exceptional events such as the current drought.

"We're here to talk about these problems and how they can be fixed," Los Banos Mayor Mike Villalta said.

Madera Mayor Robert Poythress, who serves as chair of the regional policy council, added that certain air quality provisions "could help us meet these goals that are going to be difficult to meet."

Little time remains this year for Congress to do anything but the bare minimum needed to keep the federal government running. House members are scheduled to return to full-time campaigning after Oct. 2, and lawmakers have set low expectations for the post-election lame duck session.

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