

Sierra river could win wild and scenic protections

By Don Thompson, AP

SACRAMENTO – Part of a river draining the central Sierra Nevada could win new protections from a wild-and-scenic designation under a bill approved by the state Senate on Thursday, despite complaints that the action could aggravate water shortages caused by California's drought.

The state Senate voted 22-12 to apply the designation to nearly 37 miles of the Mokelumne River in Amador and Calaveras counties.

SB1199 by Sen. Loni Hancock, D-Berkeley, heads to the Assembly over the objections of Sen. Tom Berryhill, who represents the region affected by the proposal.

Berryhill, R-Twain Harte, said the designation would prohibit dams and diversions while restricting land use along the river just when the state needs the water most.

"I just can't understand why we would ever start taking options off the table," said Berryhill, noting that water districts and Amador County supervisors are opposed. "With California reeling from a drought, now is not the time to set aside another river district."

He also objected to Hancock proposing a bill affecting his district.

"I don't think the author would appreciate me going into Berkeley and doing a bill there," he said.

Hancock said the 157-mile-long river provides water to 1.3 million residents in counties east of San Francisco. She said the bill protects existing and future water rights of four

water districts in Amador and Calaveras counties.

“I am bringing this designation forward as a Californian,” Hancock said. “This is, in fact, all of our river.”

The bill would designate 20 miles of the river’s North Fork as wild, and nine miles as recreational. Three miles of the main stem of the river would be designated as scenic, and 4.6 miles as recreational. The designation would stop at the Pardee Reservoir, about 60 miles southeast of Sacramento.