

Feinstein's role as water referee complicated by drought

By Evan Halper, Los Angeles Times

The long-range weather forecast is the biggest wild card in the battle over every available bucket of water in drought-stricken California – but a close second may be Dianne Feinstein.

In a dispute in which positions have hardened after years of fighting, the state's senior U.S. senator, who is expected to broker any deal that reallocates water supply, is one of the few remaining enigmas. The only thing consistent about Feinstein's role as water referee is that the fights have left bruises on the exacting and thick-skinned senator over the years. The last few weeks have been particularly rough.

A year that started with Central Valley figures branding her a radical environmentalist and Bay Area dilettante ended with accusations from once-friendly colleagues and liberal editorial boards that the 22-year veteran of the Senate was shilling for Big Agriculture.

For months, Feinstein had tried to craft a compromise drought relief bill by negotiating a water deal behind closed doors with the state's major agricultural interests. Late in Congress' lame-duck session, those talks collapsed. No legislation got passed.

Yet Feinstein is eager to get back in the ring as soon as Congress picks up again in January.

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