Legislators talk about future of valley water

By MARK GROSSI
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FRESNO — Four San Joaquin Valley congressmen say it’s time to stop arguing about water and start making sure there’s enough to go around.

They want a long-term plan from regional water experts for the 25,000-square-mile valley to deal with water supply and quality, environmental concerns and flood control.

And in a valley where the next water crisis can happen quickly, the lawmakers don’t want to wait long. They want a plan by June 1. Reps. Jim Costa, D-Fresno, Devin Nunes, R-Visalia, and George Radanovich, R-Mariposa, rallied water leaders and others at Fresno State, where this effort was born this week. Rep. Dennis Cardoza, D-Mono, has also signed on to the issue but could not attend the meeting.

A big focal point was the valley’s projected growth to more than 6 million people by 2055.

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"We need to balance the use for a growing population, maintenance of the agricultural economy and environmental restoration," said Costa, whose district includes a portion of Kern County. "It’s no small feat to pull together all the counties, the water interests and environmental concerns."

Four advisory groups of water experts will work on proposals for regional projects, such as groundwater banking or wetlands restoration.

The California Water Institute at Fresno State will compile the four reports into a summary next year. Lawmakers believe the plan and regional support should give them a better chance to fight for project funding.

"Proper development of a collective plan will set priorities," Radanovich said.

The congressmen said this campaign would not have been possible five years ago because of a war between east- and west-side users over the San Joaquin River. The water was settled two years ago.

The dispute now will join forces to become part of the new planning effort, said Costa, whose district includes the Santa Ana Integrated Watershed Plan, called still waiting for interested.

"Our watershed plan was formed after decades of lawsuits and fighting," said Joe Grindstaff, now chief deputy director of the state Department of Water Resources.

The meeting was filled with representatives of farm water groups and state offices.