

Obama Turns Focus to California Drought

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A discarded computer keyboard lies on the dry, cracked bed of the Almaden Reservoir in San Jose, Calif. on Friday, Feb. 7, 2014 during the state's worst drought in recorded history. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)

WASHINGTON (AP) — Opening a weekend trip to California, President Barack Obama on Friday will offer millions in federal aid for the [drought-stricken state](#) [1], then hold an unusual West Coast meeting with Jordan's King Abdullah II, a key U.S. partner in the Middle East.

After wrapping up his official business, Obama will spend the weekend at Southern California's sprawling Sunnylands estate, where there's little on the agenda besides a few rounds of golf.

[California is in the midst of its worst drought in more than 100 years](#) [2]. Obama will meet with farmers in the Fresno area, where he'll announce more than \$160 million in federal financial aid, including \$100 million in the farm bill he signed into law last week for programs that cover the loss of livestock.

The overall package includes smaller amounts to aid in the most extreme drought areas and to help food banks that serve families affected by the water shortage. Obama also will call on federal facilities in California to immediately limit water consumption.

The president will also call on Congress to pass a \$1 billion "climate resilience fund" to invest in research on climate change and support new technologies and infrastructure to make the country more resilient to a changing climate. The fund would also help communities prepare more effectively for the impacts of climate change.

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Obama will include the measure in the budget blueprint he'll send to Congress next month. But the fund is unlikely to get backing from most Republicans, and it's unclear how much political capital Obama is willing to exert to get the initiative through the divided Congress.

Later Friday, Obama was meeting Jordan's King Abdullah II at Sunnylands for talks covering the Mideast peace process, Syria and other issues. It's unusual for Obama to host world leaders outside of the White House, though he did hold a two-day summit at Sunnylands last year with Chinese President Xi Jinping.

Obama's meetings with Abdullah will be much shorter — just a brief meeting Friday night, followed by a working dinner. The White House gave few details about why the meeting had to take place in California, particularly given that Abdullah spent much of the past week in Washington and met with Vice President Joe Biden, Secretary of State John Kerry, House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, and others.

White House spokesman Jay Carney on Friday said only that the Sunnylands estate "offers a private location and less formal setting that will allow the president to have a wide-ranging discussion with the king."

After the king departs, Obama was expected to spend Presidents Day weekend on the golf course at Sunnylands. He's traveling without first lady Michelle Obama.

The White House has been closely watching the California drought, which follows a year of the lowest rainfall on record. The drought has also brought to a head political warfare over the state's water resources that feed major cities, the country's richest agricultural region and waterways that provide habitat for endangered species of fish.

Gov. Jerry Brown declared a drought emergency on Jan. 17. Obama telephoned him several days later for an update on the situation.

Farmers recently learned they will not be receiving irrigation water from the State Water Project, a system of rivers, canals and reservoirs. They anticipate a similar announcement later this month from federal authorities who operate a similar system called the Central Valley Project.

Federal officials, including Vilsack, earlier this month pledged \$34 million to help farmers and ranchers conserve scarce water supplies, improve irrigation methods, head off erosion of unplanted fields and create better ways to water livestock.

The Republican-controlled House recently voted to address the drought by rolling back environmental protections and temporarily halting the restoration of a dried-up stretch of the San Joaquin River, work that is designed to restore historic salmon runs. Farmers would prefer to have the water diverted to their crops instead.

Boehner recently showed his support for the bill by visiting a dusty field in Bakersfield and saying fish shouldn't be favored over people.

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Environmentalists and Democrats oppose the bill, and the White House has threatened a veto, arguing that the measure would not alleviate the drought but would undo decades of work to address California's longstanding water shortages.

In response, California's senators, Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer, joined fellow Democrats in proposing legislation that would pour \$300 million into emergency aid and drought relief projects, upgrade city water systems and water conservation and speed up environmental reviews of water projects, among other steps.

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Associated Press writer Scott Smith in Fresno, Calif., contributed to this report.

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