

Letter from Washington: A routine resolution gets caught up in the battle of California water policy.

What do the UCI men's championship volleyball team and the Delta smelt have in common? Plenty, when it comes to the U.S. House of Representatives.

Confused? So was I when I heard that this team's national accomplishment was not going to be honored with a resolution on the House floor because lawmakers are fighting over water and that fish.

I've heard of tit for tat in Congress. But this one is beyond anything I've seen.

Rep. John Campbell wrote the resolution to honor the Anteaters, the 2009 champs. Rep. George Miller, who chairs the Education and Labor Committee, is the gatekeeper for resolutions for any education-related matters.

An hour before Campbell's resolution was due for a vote a week ago. Miller used his power as chairman of the education committee to pull it. Why? Not because he doesn't like the UCI volleyball team. But because Campbell had joined 168 other Republicans and one Democrat in opposing a \$38 million bill Miller wanted for a Bay Area water recycling project. The bill was slated to pass on a so-called suspension calendar, a fast-track process for non-controversial measures. It needed a two-thirds yes vote and didn't get it because of GOP opposition.

Campbell voted no, he said, because Miller wouldn't support efforts by some California Republicans to fight to keep the pumps open at the Sacramento Bay Delta Pumping Station. Those pumps send water to the Central Valley and Southern California, including southern Orange County. But the pumps are now shut for between three and six months a year because several species of fish – including the Delta smelt and Chinook salmon – were found to be in danger under the Endangered Species Act.

I'm not making this up. Because of a fight over California water policy, the Anteaters aren't getting honored.

California water debate

There's undoubtedly a legitimate debate over how to balance environmental considerations and the need for a dependable water supply in California. But what has that got to do with honoring a group of kids who kicked butt playing volleyball?

Campbell said when he approached Miller on the House floor about pulling the UCI resolution" Miller said: " 'You opposed my water bill. There has to be a price to pay.' So I said and this bill (the UCI resolution) is the price? And he said yes."

Campbell said Miller was particularly upset with him because of Orange County's leadership in water recycling. "He said, 'you guys in Orange County lead the world in recycling of water and we're just trying to do the same sort of thing and you opposed it,' " Campbell recalled.

When I asked Miller's office about this I got an e-mail from his spokeswoman Amy Peake.

"Mr. Campbell voted against Mr. Miller's bill and helped defeat it. Mr. Miller believed that Mr. Campbell violated a basic element of courtesy among Members, for purely partisan political reasons. Mr. Miller is objecting for the time being to Mr. Campbell's bill being considered by the House. Perhaps the well-deserving UC Irvine Volleyball team should appeal to Mr. Campbell

to get his priorities straight."

Coach getting involved

I asked Anteater coach John Speraw what he makes of this.

"You read a lot about how Washington works and people's frustrations with it and then it strikes home," Speraw said, adding that he's used to giving interviews about the prowess of his sports team. Now he's giving "political" interviews because his team is tied up in this water fight.

Speraw has no illusions about where his team's resolution fits in the grand scheme of things.

"Congress clearly has better things to worry about than recognizing our team," he said. "The issue is how you turn something that should be so simple into such a state?"

Speraw is drafting a letter to Miller. And he's going to ask the congressman what this is all about and why his team can't get the recognition that he believes they deserve.

Meanwhile, there is an underlying issue here.

Three years of drought have created a water crisis in the state, particularly in the Central Valley where farmers don't have the water to irrigate their crops and unemployment is more than twice the national average.

Sen. Dianne Feinstein has also gotten involved in this issue; getting money in the latest Department of Interior appropriations bill for a National Academy of Sciences study to see if something can be found to protect the fish and get water where its needed before the Delta pumps are shut off again next spring.

At the Orange County Water District, spokeswoman Darcy Burke is glad to see Campbell speaking out on this issue.

"I want him to do whatever he needs to do to turn the pumps back on" permanently, she said. "We have businesses that will leave Orange County if they don't have water."

The Metropolitan Water District, which helps supply water to OC, took a 25 percent hit in water supply because of the pump shut-off.

The district spread the pain of this cutback among all the water districts, Burke said, so Orange County also got cut back. Water rates have gone up, not just because of this issue but because of three years of below normal rainfall and the reallocation of Colorado River water, she said.

Miller's bill for the Bay Area recycling project passed the House on Thursday under the regular procedure where it only needed a simple majority to pass.

Campbell voted no again.

Campbell said he had asked Miller last week whether the UC Irvine resolution was "dead, dead, dead." Miller told him: "We'll see."

Now that Miller got his recycling bill, will he relent and let the UCI volleyball team get its recognition?

We'll be watching.