

EPA launching probe into Delta water quality, water use

Seeks public input / 'EPA is committed to tackling the pollution degrading the Delta'

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The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency says it is seeking public input on the effectiveness of current water quality programs influencing the health of the San Francisco Bay Delta Estuary.

Its "Advanced Notice of Proposed Rulemaking" identifies pivotal water quality issues affecting Bay Delta fisheries, describes regulatory measures currently underway, and initiates an information-gathering process on how the EPA and the state of California can achieve water quality and aquatic resource protection goals in one of the West Coast's most ecologically diverse and important aquatic habitats.

The Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta is the hub of California's water distribution system, providing drinking water to 25 million people, sustaining irrigation for 4 million acres of farmland, and supporting 750 different species of plants, fish, and wildlife, several of which are endangered or threatened.

But the water quality of the estuary and many of its tributaries is impaired, the EPA says, and habitat is shrinking with many fish populations are at all-time lows.

"The Bay Delta is a major source of our tap water and the water used to grow our food," says Jared Blumenfeld, EPA's Pacific Southwest administrator.

"EPA is committed to tackling the pollution degrading the Delta, which is threatened by contaminants from sewage, pesticides, and a host of other chemicals," he says.

No single factor is responsible for the decline of the Delta's health, the EPA says. Its present condition reflects the cumulative and interactive effects of water pollution, invasive species, water diversion and habitat degradation. Impacts associated with these stressors include toxicity to fish, invertebrates and their food sources, developmental deformities, and reproductive problems.

"Identifying the water quality challenges in the Bay Delta is key to addressing the delta's complex and long-standing water problems and ensuring healthy communities and economies in California," says Nancy Sutley, chairman of the White House Council on Environmental Quality.

In its Advanced Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, EPA says that it will be coordinating its review of water quality issues with the on-going development of the Bay Delta Conservation Plan, which currently is being developed through a collaboration of federal, state and local agencies, environmental organizations, and other interested parties.

Public input and scientific findings obtained from the ANPR will be reviewed and used to develop a strategic proposal for future EPA efforts toward protecting the Bay Delta and other important waterways, the agency says.

The ANPR is to be published in the Federal Register within one week. EPA encourages interested parties to read the ANPR and provide additional information and suggestions for actions to improve Delta water quality and aquatic resource protection.