

# U.S. to study water pollution in Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta

**Matt Weiser, Sacramento Bee, 2-10-11**

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency today plans to announce a comprehensive review of water pollution in the Delta, a first step in containing a problem the agency admits is overdue for closer analysis.

The review will focus on a wide range of pollutants, from farm and household pesticides to urban wastewater and wetland disturbances.

The end result could include new pesticide limits and more aggressive review of land grading and dredging activities, which can cause erosion that harms habitat.

The review is being conducted under the authority of the Clean Water Act, a powerful federal law that dates back – in original form – to 1948.

"This is an incredibly critical ecosystem that is on the brink of collapse," said Jared Blumenfeld, EPA regional administrator. "This, for the first time, tries to look holistically and say, 'What should be done that isn't being done, and are there things EPA should do that we're not.' "

The Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta is the largest estuary on the West Coast of the Americas. It drains half of California's precipitation.

As a result, the Delta also collects a lot of pollution from millions of people in a watershed the size of Florida.

Over the past decade, numerous fish species in the Delta have plunged toward extinction, with significant economic consequences.

Water pollution is known to be a factor in fish declines, but pinpointing cause and effect is often difficult.

The subject is controversial in upstream communities, where there is a historic tendency to blame Delta problems on water diverted from it, not pollution flow into it.

"We want to contribute in a positive way," said John Woodling, executive director of the Sacramento Regional Water Authority. "We just don't want to shoulder an economic burden for this region that isn't proportional to whatever impact we may have had."

Others view things differently.

"Pollution control definitely needs a greater focus in the Delta," said Brent Walthall, assistant general manager of the Kern County Water Agency, one of the largest Delta water diverters.

The EPA effort, called an "advance notice of proposed rulemaking," comes in response to a 2009 directive by the Obama administration to do more on Delta problems. It aims to complement the Bay-Delta Conservation Plan, a habitat-focused effort involving other federal agencies.

The EPA will focus on several broad areas, including ammonia in urban wastewater, pesticides, pharmaceuticals, salinity and wetlands.

Scientists and the public are asked to contribute information over the next 60 days. By the end of this year, a draft report will summarize the problems and propose fixes.

In many cases, new regulations are already in the works. For instance, new ammonia limits were imposed in December on the Sacramento Regional County Sanitation District, which discharges the capital-area's treated wastewater into the Sacramento River.

The EPA expects to adopt an even tighter nationwide ammonia standard within a year.

The agency is also reviewing the toxicity of many pesticides, especially pyrethroids, which are common in many household products.

It is a common misconception, Blumenfeld said, that pesticides are an agricultural problem. In fact, 50 percent of pesticides found in Delta waters comes from urban areas.

"What's under your kitchen sink is having an impact on the Delta," he said. "Most people wouldn't want to admit that, but the science shows it's a major contributor."

One example is bifenthrin, a pesticide in many consumer products. Donald Weston, a toxicologist at UC Berkeley, has detected bifenthrin at toxic levels in the American River and has found that it lingers in the water longer than other pyrethroids.

"It is responsible for more than its share of problems," Weston said, "so that's one I'd like to see EPA take a closer look at."

Selenium is another example. Naturally occurring in some soils, selenium can enter waterways at unnatural concentrations via agricultural practices. It can deform birds, fish and other wildlife and is a long-running problem in the Delta.

"This is an area where we know the standards are insufficient," said Blumenfeld, who anticipates a tighter selenium rule within 18 months. "We need to redouble our efforts to ensure this long-held, common knowledge about these problems is acted upon."