

Salt worries building in Delta waters

Alex Breitler, Stockton Record, 7-24-15

State officials acknowledged this week that they are “struggling” to keep portions of the Delta fresh, as saltier water from San Francisco Bay pushes inland during yet another summer of drought.

Normally, rivers from interior California help push back that saltier water and keep the Delta fresh, which is important for people and fish alike. But this year the rivers are low, which allows the Bay water to move toward the east and invade portions of the tidally influenced estuary.

In order to hold back more water in depleted reservoirs, the state Department of Water Resources and U.S. Bureau of Reclamation earlier this year asked regulators to temporarily weaken certain salinity standards in the west Delta, rules that are supposed to protect agriculture. The request was granted.

Now, in two locations, even those weakened standards have been exceeded — one on the Sacramento River at Threemile Slough, and another on the San Joaquin River at Jersey Point.

“I think in some ways it’s not too surprising,” John Lehigh, who oversees operations of California’s water delivery system, told the State Water Resources Control Board this week. “We knew things were going to be tight.”

Little water can be released from reservoirs to push back the saltier water, he said. A “very unfavorable” tide also contributed to the recent salinity problem. By Tuesday the Jersey Point location was back in compliance with the standard.

The good news, Lehigh said, is that a rock barrier installed by the state earlier this spring appears to be preventing saltwater from pushing into the heart of the Delta, where it could cause problems for even more farmers and foul up drinking-water supplies.

Some environmentalists have challenged the water board’s decision to allow those scientifically determined water-quality standards to be weakened. In a complaint filed Wednesday, the Stockton-based California Sportfishing Protection Alliance warned that the looser standards also imperil fish that already are on the verge of extinction, such as the tiny Delta smelt.

Stockton’s Restore the Delta filed its own protest on Thursday. Tim Strohane, the group’s policy advisor, said the state’s water system still is being operated as it was four decades ago, with reservoirs drawn down in the early years of the drought under the assumption that a healthy snowpack would follow.

So far, it hasn’t. Now, Strohane said, “The system is really in quite a crisis.”