

# An era of limits: California proposes steering more water to fish, less to farms, cities

**Ryan Sabalow and Dale Kasler, The Sacramento Bee, 9-15-16**

In a move that foreshadows sweeping statewide reductions in the amount of river water available for human needs, California regulators on Thursday proposed a stark set of cutbacks to cities and farms that receive water from the San Joaquin River and its tributaries.

To protect endangered fish at critical parts of their life cycle, regulators proposed leaving hundreds of thousands of additional acre-feet of water in the San Joaquin River system. As little as 20 percent of the river now flows unimpeded to the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, and regulators said they want the so-called “natural” flow raised to at least 30 percent and perhaps as high as 50 percent.

The proposal by staff members at the State Water Resources Control Board is yet another effort to improve the ecosystem of one of California’s most overused river systems, where flows sometimes drop to a comparative trickle. Overhauling the San Joaquin system is sure to add new drama to the conflicts over California’s stretched water supply, a situation that has been complicated by the onset of drought five years ago.

The five-person board will gather input from farmers, environmentalists and others before voting on a plan, likely early next year.

With more water devoted to fish and other environmental needs, the proposal could lead to substantial cuts in water deliveries to San Francisco, Modesto, Merced and Turlock, as well as San Joaquin Valley farmers who pull from the rivers to water their crops. The process is likely to entail legal and political fights, as many of those cities and farm groups hold so-called “senior” water rights, whose historic claims on water have traditionally buffered them from cutbacks.

The proposal set off alarm bells in San Francisco, which has been drawing water from the Tuolumne River for nearly a century. “This could have serious implications for the 2.6 million water customers we serve throughout the Bay Area,” said Charles Sheehan, spokesman for the city’s Public Utilities Commission.

State officials propose leaving anywhere between 288,000 and 485,000 acre-feet of additional water in the river system. Water board staff said the plan would curb agricultural production by an estimated \$64 million a year. That represents 2.5 percent of the annual farm production in the affected areas.

Farm groups, already struggling with dropoffs in water deliveries during the drought, said they believe the impact would be far greater.

Mike Wade of the California Farm Water Coalition said the region served by the San Joaquin watershed is heavily planted in vineyards, nut trees and other high-value crops, and the decline in output would be closer to \$150 million. The California Farm Bureau Federation said the plan could idle as many as 240,000 acres of Central Valley farmland “with no guarantee the redirection of water will help the fish.”

One of the state’s leading fishing groups, on the other hand, applauded the announcement. John McManus, executive director of the Golden Gate Salmon Association, described the proposal as “a historic step to right a wrong” that has imperiled numerous species, including salmon, smelt and steelhead trout.

“Now we have a chance to at least save some of the salmon that still survive in the San Joaquin and its tributaries by leaving a little bit of water for them,” he said in an emailed statement.

The several thousand pages of documents released by the water board represent the first phase in a sweeping set of regulatory updates that eventually will determine just how much water must be left in the Delta ecosystem. Felicia Marcus, the board’s chairwoman, said the standards haven’t been updated since 1995.

“The current standards are out of date, and fish populations have plummeted,” she said on a conference call with reporters. The fish “need far more water left in the river to have a chance at survival.”

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She also said regulators are trying to minimize harm to farms and cities – a task that she admits won’t be easy.

“You will hear we’ve done too much,” she told reporters. “You will hear we haven’t done enough. You will not hear anyone tell us we got it just right.”

In the coming months, the state board also will re-examine water flows into the Delta from the Sacramento River. Regulators said that they don’t expect changes in flow requirements there would be as drastic.

The state board is charged with overseeing California’s complicated system of senior and junior water rights, while making sure enough water is allocated to environmental purposes. A 1969 state law and 1986 court ruling give the water board the authority to take supplies from water rights holders, but legal experts say there’s plenty of gray area and a final decision could get tied up in court, possibly for years.

Steve Knell, general manager of the Oakdale Irrigation District, offered a blunt reaction to Thursday’s announcement.

“We are going to challenge it,” he said. “We don’t think this is the correct way to address water issues in California.”

With scientists predicting warmer winters and longer droughts in the years ahead, Gov. Jerry Brown and state regulators repeatedly have warned urban and rural residents that they should prepare for a new era of limits. But, in practice, the water board has had a mixed record when it comes to reining in the state’s historically liberal water use.

Last year, the board ordered some senior water rights holders to stop taking water from the Delta, and fined one district \$1.5 million for ignoring its order. But it backed off when it acknowledged it couldn’t prove the district wasn’t entitled to the water.

Earlier this spring, the board also scrapped its year-old conservation rules that forced urban water agencies to cut consumption by an average of 25 percent over 2013. Districts now are allowed to set their own conservation standards, and urban water use is on the rise.

Marcus said she believes the water board has the legal authority to order districts to leave more water in the San Joaquin and its tributaries, but she’s hoping they’ll come to the table rather than fight.

“We’re hoping they’ll work with us, and they’ll chip in their fair share,” she said.

The Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers merge to form the largest estuary on the West Coast, a fragile ecosystem that serves as the hub of California's water delivery network. Two government-run pumping plants in the south Delta deliver water to 25 million people in Southern California and the Bay Area, as well as 3 million acres of farmland in the San Joaquin Valley.

During the years of drought, Central Valley farmers have turned to intensive groundwater pumping to make up for lost surface supplies, critically depleting aquifers in some basins. State officials acknowledged Thursday that the new plan would lead to even more pumping as farmers compensate for further cutbacks.

Jay Lund, director of the Center for Watershed Sciences at UC Davis, said Californians must reckon with a water system that's been taxed beyond its limits.

"Even if you were to capture every drop of water that fell in the San Joaquin Basin, you're not going to have enough water for all of the people that are expecting water," Lund said. "It's simple arithmetic."