

Westlands asks to ease pumping limits

Seth Nidever, Hanford Sentinel, 1-30-10

Westlands Water District is asking a federal court to temporarily suspend pumping restrictions that have limited water deliveries from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River delta to protect endangered fish, the district announced Friday.

Westlands' announcement comes on the heels of major winter storms last week that dumped inches of rain on the San Joaquin Valley and several feet of snow in the mountains, boosting reservoir levels and increasing flows into the delta.

Much of the inflow can be pumped out for delivery to Westside farmers without threatening the endangered delta smelt, according to the district.

"The relief we are seeking doesn't threaten the delta smelt this time of year. The fish agencies' own surveys show that the vast majority of the smelt are currently residing in northern and western parts of the delta," said Thomas Birmingham, general manager of Westlands.

Federal agencies have ordered pumping restrictions to protect the delta smelt and other species such as salmon and steelhead. The powerful pumps that suck water out of the delta into irrigation canals can sometimes reverse flows, preventing young fish from reaching the ocean. In addition, smelt may be killed as they are drawn into the pump intakes.

A smelt ruling from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has reduced pumping by 10,000 acre-feet of water a day, according to Westlands. A second ruling from the National Marine Fisheries Service to protect salmon will further reduce pumping by another 8,000 acre-feet a day, Westlands said.

The general rule is that crops need about 3 acre-feet of water per acre, meaning that the cutbacks could irrigate 6,000 acres of farmland. Westlands has also been facing major drought-related reductions in water deliveries. The shortages have worsened high unemployment in Westside communities.

The National Academy of Sciences is currently reviewing the environmental rulings. Academy scientists were at the University of California, Davis, this week taking testimony from federal fish agencies and water districts such as Westlands affected by the cutbacks.