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7. WATER: Dearth of delta smelt shuts Calif. pumps

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Citing the continued precipitous decline in the numbers of a tiny fish used as an indicator of ecosystem health, the California Department of Water Resources has declared an emergency shut down of massive pumps used to push water along the state aqueduct to Southern California.

The State Water Project supplies water to 25 million residents and some 750,000 acres of farms in Central and Southern California.

DWR Director Lester Snow announced the action to reporters on May 31, saying that the combination of historic low survey counts of threatened delta smelt and a sudden increase in the number of juvenile fish killed by the pumps led state officials to terminate State Water Project operations at the Harvey O. Banks pumping station in Tracy for seven to 10 days, in the hopes that the remaining young fish would begin their usual westward migration in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta and away from the pumps.



The delta smelt is just 2 to 3 inches in size, but it is having a tremendous effect on California's water policy. State Water Project pumps remain shut this week as part of the effort to save the fish from depletion. Photo courtesy of Fish and Wildlife Service.

Snow said that water temperatures near the pumps were cooler than usual, but when they reached 25 degrees Celsius, the smelt were expected to begin their migration.

In the meantime, he assured questioners, there will be no need for rationing water supplies. Most customers of the water project would be served their allowed current shares -- which were already trimmed to just 60 percent of contracted allocations because of scant snow melt and little spring rain -- but several water districts would be forced to rely on alternative supplies in the interim. "We don't expect anyone to run out of water because we shut the pumps down," Snow said. "We are structuring this so people are not without water. For seven to 10

days, we think we can manage this."

Southern California customers, including farmers and water districts, would be served from the San Luis Reservoir, which Snow said had been previously brought up to full capacity. Others, including water agencies that serve San Francisco Bay area communities of Santa Clara and Oakland, would need to draw on groundwater sources and alternate reservoirs. Larger cities, such as San Francisco, San Jose and Sacramento do not rely on state project water and were unaffected.

However, throughout the state, water managers called on their customers to conserve water in view of the upcoming summer and the expectation of continued problems with the Delta. Following its usual spring schedule, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation had also cut back on pumping on the Central Valley Project in order to allow more fresh water to flow into the delta. While increased pumping would be the norm beginning by late May, the bureau is maintaining flows at well below normal levels.

Reclamation spokesman Jeff McCracken said, "We are at minimum pumping levels." The federal facilities at the Jones Pumps are moving 852 cubic feet per second, or about 1,689 acre-feet per day. "We'd normally be up around 3,500 [cubic feet per second]," he said. Only the smallest of five pumps at the facility is currently in

operation, mainly to keep providing the city of Tracy with drinking water.

In addition, the agency has purchased water to keep San Joaquin River levels up while it is drawing down water at the San Luis Reservoir as it supplies customers. The reservoir is dropping by 1.9 feet per day, which is the most Reclamation can allow, McCracken said.

In all, the federal operations on the Central Valley Project supply water to 20,000 farms and 3 million people, with most of that south of the Tracy pump stations.

Water managers and biologists are monitoring the situation on a daily basis to see when it will be possible to resume pumping. McCracken said there have not been any fish killed at the Tracy pumps in the past week but "no one seems to know" if that is because the smelt have migrated west.

Courts still a threat

Though Snow said DWR's decision to halt pumping was unrelated to current litigation, there is a distinct threat that an Alameda County judge could order the same pumps at Tracy shut down later this month, after finding the state is in violation of state and federal laws meant to protect the smelt and other fish in the system. Judge Frank Roesch in late March put the state on notice that unless it came up with a way of complying with requirements for an incidental take permit covering the smelt killed by the pumps, he would order an end to pumping beginning June 16.

One strategy that the state tried to pursue -- seeking a ruling from the Fish and Game Commission that its actions were already in compliance with federal rules -- had to be abandoned in the wake of another recent court ruling. Federal District Judge Oliver Wanger in late May determined that the federal biological opinion governing delta operations was flawed and must be rewritten to better protect the fish. Environmental groups suing the government in that case said they were considering seeking an injunction against water exports on the aqueduct until a new biological opinion was in place.

The state was backed further into a corner after a May survey of fish monitoring stations in various parts of the delta revealed significantly reduced counts, only 25 fish in all this year, less than 10 percent of last year's count ([Land Letter](#), May 24). It was another indication of the dramatic decline in fish counts since the state increased exports to Southern California over the past decade -- though DWR contends there are other reasons for the decline besides pumping.

With such low numbers of smelt being documented, state officials were taken aback when there was a sudden increase in entrainment at the state and federal pumping stations in late May. According to Snow, between May 25-31, 216 smelt larger than 20 millimeters in size were killed at the Banks pumps and another 288 were recorded killed on the federal system.

Ryan Brodrick, Director of the California Department of Fish and Game, said that the situation was a result of fish gathering near the pumps instead of migrating as usual because of tidal cycles and low water temperatures, and being caught up in the pumps. "The reality is, the fish still haven't moved west and when the tides kicked in we had taking of the delta smelt," he explained.

Besides the pump shut down, the state suspended several scientific studies that might result in incidental takings of the smelt. "At this point we don't want any unintended consequences," Brodrick said.

Fish groups that have taken the state to court think officials are both denying the effect of pumping and understating the numbers of fish being killed. Bill Jennings, chairman of the California Sportsfishing Protection Alliance, believes that the pumps kill many times the number of fish being reported by the state. Citing a multiplier derived from a former state fish and game manager, Jennings claims that in May about 2,900 smelt were killed by state pumps and more than 8,500 killed at the federal plant for an approximate total of 11,500, not the 500 reported by DWR. "Clearly, agency spokespersons have not been candid," Jennings stated.