

State Plans to Slash Water Shipments

■ **Drought:** Authorities also propose fee increases in effort to halt deterioration of endangered delta by exports to Southland.

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SACRAMENTO—In a bold attempt to stop the rapid deterioration of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, state water authorities announced their intention Thursday to order stiff reductions in water exports to Southern California farms and cities and impose new fees for users.

Saying that it was determined to provide a high level of protection for the endangered estuary, the State Water Resources Control Board released proposed standards that place strict controls on the amount and time of year that water can be pumped out of the delta for delivery to contractors in Southern and Central California.

The same standards also establish a \$300-million environmental fund to be financed by a new fee on water that is exported from the delta or diverted from rivers upstream. The higher fees are expected to be passed on to the millions of Southland households and businesses who consume the exported water.

The state is taking the action because of concern over the increasingly heavy demand for delta water that is pumped out and shipped south by two major water delivery systems. The reduction of fresh water flowing through the vast network of channels has resulted in harm to fish and wildlife as saltwater from the sea has intruded farther upstream.

"The State Water Resources Control Board believes that when implemented, [this decision] will stop the decline of fisheries in the delta and significantly increase the survival of migrating fish," board member Marc Del Pero said.

Officials conceded that the new standards would have the greatest impact on the State Water Project, a system of dams, reservoirs and aqueducts that provide water to 27 contractors, including the mammoth Metropolitan Water District of Southern California. The board is scheduled to take a final vote on the proposal Jan. 25.

Del Pero said the proposal would reduce State Water Project deliveries by an average 250,000 acre-feet a year, although in dry periods the reductions could be much greater. In years when there is normal rainfall, the state project delivers about 3.5-million acre-feet and provides about half of MWD's water supply.

Although California's other major water delivery system, the federally operated Central Valley Project, would have its exports from the delta cut by an average 550,000 acre-feet, officials said they did not expect that system to be as severely affected by the decision. A new CVP reform law requires the project to set aside 600,000 to 800,000 acre-feet a year for the environment. The latest proposed reductions would count toward the federally mandated cutback.

Assistant MWD General Manager Duane Georgeson said the proposed reductions in state deliveries would not lead to mandatory rationing in Southern California. Of greater concern to the district, he said, is whether the board's order will be the first of many governmental directives to restrict pumping in the delta. He said additional orders are expected from federal agencies to protect endangered winter run Chinook salmon and the delta smelt.

"It's the cumulative impact of all of those that really sound very unsettling, very disturbing," he said. "Clearly, the handwriting has been on the wall for a number of years that the State Water Project was going to become less and less reliable as these fishery and endangered species issues have become controllers of the water projects."

He said the new fees imposed on the MWD will be passed on to its customers

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and make the next rate increase higher than it would be otherwise, although the amount of future increase has not been determined. The proposal places a \$10.50-per-acre-foot charge on water exported from the delta.

Located east of San Francisco, the delta is a labyrinth of sloughs and channels formed by the confluence of the San Joaquin and Sacramento rivers. Its strategic location and rich marshes have made it a vital habitat for fish and wildlife and a critical transfer point for water that is stored in upstream reservoirs and shipped south to farms and cities.

In recent years, the waterway has become a battleground for water users and environmentalists as drought, agricultural drainage and pumping by the two projects have reduced the amount of fresh water in the delta and allowed saltwater to creep in from San Francisco Bay. As the quality of delta water has deteriorated, many species of fish have declined precipitously. State law and court decisions have given the five gubernatorial appointees who make up the water resources board the unenviable responsibility of pro-

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tecting the delta estuary and water supplies of California farms and cities.

Last spring, Gov. Pete Wilson gave the board six months to come up with interim standards to halt and reverse the continuing decline of the . . . delta estuary."

Del Pero said the new standards require the projects to reduce exports from the delta between Feb. 1 and June 30 of each year to protect young fish and eggs. How much the exports are reduced, he said, will depend upon how much precipitation there is each year.

To cut back demands for water, the proposal mandates that urban districts undertake extensive water conservation programs, including those that encourage the installation of low-flush toilets and the installation of water meters in areas that do not have them. Georgeson said the MWD has instituted most of the programs required by the proposed order.

Del Pero said the new environmental fund, which will generate an estimated \$60 million a year or \$300 million over the five-year life of the standards, will be used for such things as fish hatcheries and the installation of fish screens and temperature control devices.