

Weather & environment

Fate of Mokelumne River, drinking water for millions

SACRAMENTO (McClatchy) — With the fate of a 75-mile stretch of river and the drinking water supply of more than a million people at stake, long-awaited hearings on the Mokelumne River opened Monday before the State Water Resources Control Board.

At issue is whether the East Bay Municipal Utility District, which serves 1.1 million customers in Alameda and Contra Costa counties, should change its diversions from the Mokelumne River to allow recovery of a nearly extinct salmon run.

The case is being watched by other water agencies that, like EBMUD, divert water from high points on Sierra streams in order to ensure better purity than that found farther down stream.

The water board could force EBMUD to lower its withdrawal point to the Delta,

thereby allowing more water to flow down the river's last 75 miles and into the Delta, which has suffered from a lack of fresh-water flows.

The decision concerning the Mokelumne may apply immediately to the Tuolumne, Merced, Stanislaus and American rivers, said William Jennings, director of the Committee to Save the Mokelumne River. "The idea of high diversions is simply wrong. We must establish a principle of water going to a Delta pool to restore the Delta."

A 130-mile-long stream born 10,000 feet high at the Sierra's crest, the Mokelumne is shunted into three aqueducts at Pardee Reservoir, near Lodi, to make up 95 percent of EBMUD's supply.

The river once supported fall and spring runs of chinook salmon as well as runs of steelhead, shad and striped bass, according to

Jennings.

The spring run disappeared with the construction of EBMUD's Pardee Reservoir in 1929. Camanche Reservoir, built 10 miles below Pardee in 1963, destroyed much of the fall run's spawning habitat. Only several hundred fall-run salmon returned to the river last year.

In an effort to salvage that run, as well as other wildlife that depends on the river, the Committee to Save the Mokelumne in October 1987 petitioned the state water board to investigate EBMUD for unreasonable use of its water.

The week-long hearings launched Monday are the result of that plea and constitute a review of EBMUD's 70-year-old water rights. The board has the power to change the way EBMUD operates its dams in order to protect

the public's interest in the Mokelumne.

Environmentalists argue that EBMUD should be forced to draw its water from the Delta, already the source of drinking water for two-thirds of California's residents.

"We think it is unreasonable that the residents of Oakland should insist on washing cars, flushing toilets and watering lawns with water supplied in a way that means the death of a river," said Jennings.

A 1991 state Department of Fish and Game study of the lower Mokelumne recommended greater flows down the river but did not exactly advise moving EBMUD's diversion point to the Delta.

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lumne involving a more moderate increase in flows.

EBMUD officials said that some of the Fish and Game Department's flow recommendations could not be met even if it stopped drawing water from the Mokelumne and depleted Pardee Reservoir.

They also argue that it would be bad public policy to switch to Delta water given ever-stricter federal water quality standards. Delta water is subject to urban and farm runoff and saltwater intrusion from the Pacific Ocean. EBMUD figures it would cost hundreds of millions of dollars to build a more refined treatment plant.

And pumping from the Delta — a key fish migratory route — is liable to do more harm than good, said EBMUD's chief planner, John Lampe.