State water panel would cut supply from Delta by 12%

SACRAMENTO (McClatchy) — The State Water Resources Control Board issued a draft decision Thursday that would take water away from agencies from Redding to Los Angeles to help restore the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.

Under the proposal, water taken from the Delta — the source of almost 55 percent of the state's water supply — could be cut back from 300,000 acre-feet to 1.9 million acre-feet a year, with cities and farmers left to use conservation and water transfers to make up the difference.

On average, the cutback will constitute about 12 percent of the water shipped out of the Delta every year. What's more, 64 irrigation districts and water agencies — including the city of Sacramento — that divert from the rivers that feed the Delta would be required to either release more water or stop diverting water for several days in the spring, when fish are migrating.

The decision, expected to be approved by the board Jan. 25 and go into effect immediately, also mandates urban conservation, restricts when water can be pumped from the Delta and charges water users up to an extra $10 an acre-foot to pay for environmental damage.

Water users statewide scrambled Thursday to make sense of the draft plan. Farm groups decried it as a commandeering of the state's water that will spread unemployment and grief through the Central Valley. Environmentalists said the decision is a step forward that does not go far enough. And urban water agencies predicted it would bring higher rates and rationing to consumers.

"At least we know what we have to do," said Jeffrey McCracken, spokesman for the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, which must decide by Feb. 15 how much water it can deliver through the Central Valley Project, the biggest diverter of Delta water. "We just want it to rain a lot."

McCracken said whatever water the CVP uses to meet the board's new requirements may count toward the 800,000 acre-feet a year it must set aside for fish and wildlife as dictated by a new federal water bill.

The draft decision meets Gov. Pete Wilson's request that the water board draft Delta standards by the end of the year to stabilize the estuary, where populations of striped bass and salmon have plummeted and a series of fish species have become candidates for endangered status.

Water board members said the decision should also head off federal intervention. Lately, federal agencies have dictated water project operations by setting guidelines for the endangered winter-run chinook salmon. And environmentalists are using a lawsuit to try to force the federal Environmental Protection Agency to override the water board's current Delta standards.

The EPA is poised to do so, having already put the board on notice that its current standards — based on salinity measured at various spots in the Delta — hurt fish and wildlife.

Board members said their new proposal should satisfy the EPA, even though it depends less on tighter salinity standards than on pumping cutbacks and on pulses of water released in the spring to help migrating fish.

"We believe this order addresses their concerns," said board member Marc Del Piero, who described the decision as "progressive," "dynamic," and powerful enough to boost striped bass, Delta smelt and salmon populations.

The draft decision would cut Central Valley Project supplies by 550,000 acre-feet a year on average, and take another 250,000 acre-feet a year on average from the State Water Project. (An acre-foot of water is enough to supply roughly five people's domestic needs for a year).

The draft decision limits the amount of water the projects could send south during spring snowmelt by slowing water pumps in the western Delta from February through June and requiring closure of the Delta Cross Channel gates near Walnut Grove in those months, when young salmon are in the Sacramento River.

What's more, the board's draft decision mandates urban water conservation measures, such as low-flow toilets and water meters in new buildings.