

Biologists: Raising California dam would harm salmon



In this photo taken Dec. 23, 2014, is a Chinook salmon swimming in Salt Creek, a tributary to the Sacramento River near Redding, Calif. Officials plan to more than triple the number of endangered winter-run Chinook salmon released into the Sacramento River following a massive die-off last year. In February the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service plans to release about 600,000 into the water below the Keswick Dam on the Sacramento River.

REDDING RECORD SEARCHLIGHT, DAMON ARTHUR — AP Photo

REDDING, Calif. — A proposal to raise Shasta Dam and boost California's ability to store water for dry years has drawn criticism from federal biologists who say it would harm endangered salmon.

Biologists for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said in a draft report that raising the Northern California dam by 18.5 feet would flood salmon habitat.

Before starting work, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, which owns the dam, needs approval from federal biologists who oversee the Endangered Species Act.

Raising the dam is a leading project under consideration for part of a \$7.5 billion water bond that California voters approved in November. Some \$2.7 billion will be used for storage projects, building two new reservoirs or creating underground storage. The specifics of the spending have not yet been decided.

Tom Stokely of the California Water Impact Network told the San Jose Mercury News (<http://bayareane.ws/1JleLxs>) in a story Tuesday that the biologists' draft report was a "huge setback" for the project.

"It shows they need to go back to the drawing board," he said.

Meanwhile, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service says it will release more than triple the number of winter-run Chinook salmon into the Sacramento River following a massive die-off last year.

About 600,000 fish will be released into the water below Keswick Dam on the Sacramento River.

Located 10 miles north of Redding, Shasta Lake is the state's largest reservoir and provides irrigation water for farmers and drinking water to Californians, mostly in the San Francisco Bay Area.

The proposal would increase the dam's capacity by 14 percent. The drought has left the dam just 42 percent full.

Mike Wade, executive director of the California Farm Water Coalition, which supports the project, said the agency's report is frustrating because voters overwhelmingly approved the water bond.

"The voters made their point," he said. "They want to see investment in water storage projects."

Bill Jennings, a spokesman for the California Sportfishing Protection Alliance, opposes the project that he said is driven by pork-barrel politics designed to benefit a handful of corporate farmers in the Central Valley.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service spokesman Steve Martarano said the draft report is subject to change.

In an effort to restore the salmon, officials next week expect to release fish from the Livingston Stone National Fish Hatchery north of Redding, the Redding Record-Searchlight reported (<http://bit.ly/1wANWlx>).

Warm water is to blame for killing off about 95 percent of salmon eggs and recently hatched fish from the hatchery. The winter-run salmon rely on water below 60 degrees for spawning.

During normal years, colder water for fish is pulled from a deeper pool beneath the surface of the lake and sent through the dam into the river. But after three years of drought, the lake fell to its second-lowest level on record, depleting the cold water.

State Department of Fish and Wildlife spokeswoman Jordan Traverso said typically about 27 percent of the young salmon released from the hatchery survive. State officials estimate survival last year at roughly 5 percent.

"It means there is a high likelihood that there may not be many, if any, naturally spawned winter-run returning to spawn in 2017," he said.

Information from: Record Searchlight, <http://redding.com>

Copyright

© 2015 www.fresnobee.com and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved. <http://www.fresnobee.com>