

## EDITORIAL: With human impacts escalating, Valley needs this water



There is no spare water in the drought-punished San Joaquin Valley, as evidenced by the rocky banks of Pine Flat Lake in this photo taken Jan. 26.

### FRESNO BEE FILE

In what passes for winter, the sun burned away the February fog and the thermometer reached the mid-70s in the Central Valley.

“Another tragically beautiful day,” Mark Cowin, the Department of Water Resources director, said at a hearing in Sacramento last week focused on the drought and its parched complexities.

With the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, Cowin’s department is responsible for supplying water to many of California’s farms and cities. The two agencies submitted a “temporary urgency change petition” seeking greater flexibility in water project operations to better cope with the drought.

The Water Resources Control Board staff approved the bulk of the request, but balked at allowing an additional release in March of roughly 84,000 acre feet, enough to cover 84,000 acres under a foot of water.

The board will decide the issue in the coming days, as it seeks to balance endangered species of fish, against the needs of farms and cities, and birds that depend on wetlands south of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta as they migrate up and down the Pacific Flyway.

Delta fisheries are crashing, and salt water threatens to intrude farther upstream. But if experts conclude endangered delta fish can survive for another year, then the board should send the additional water south because people's lives hang in the balance. A caveat: Constant monitoring must continue to guard against further degradation.

State and federal agencies responsible for protecting fish attest that the water could be pumped without driving delta species and salmon runs closer to extinction, though the water board's staff questions the findings.

The amount of water may seem huge, but 84,000 acre feet is a trickle, less than 2% of the water that would be funneled south of the delta in wet times. The intensity of the fight over that trickle reflects the gravity of the crisis.

More than 300 people showed up for the hearing, occupying every seat in the 250-seat California Environmental Protection Agency auditorium, and a filled spill-over room.

Sophisticated consultants had bused in dozens of San Joaquin Valley farm workers wearing T-shirts that read, "Stop the man-made drought," as if any man could cause below-normal rainfall in eight of the past nine years.

Andy Souza, director of the Community Food Bank, testified that because of drought-related layoffs, there has been a fourfold increase in the number of families seeking food in Fresno, Kern and Tulare counties, the three richest farm counties in the richest farm state in America.

Sen. Dianne Feinstein, House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy and five other California congressional members wrote to the board urging that it permit the additional transfer.

The issue involves much more than 84,000 acre feet of water. Questions are much more basic.

Is the drought a stubborn but passing weather pattern, or have we entered into a new normal?

In a state of almost 40 million people, can California afford to spare water for the environment?

Can farmers continue to produce half of the nation's fresh fruit and nuts, and ship a large share of its bounty to other nations?

Shall we say sorry to the delta smelt, and let the last of the lowly fish disappear?

We already rely on hatcheries to spawn salmon, and truck fingerlings to Suisun Bay because rivers are too low or too warm to sustain wild runs. Should we give up on wild salmon runs and grow more almonds, California's highest value crop, worth \$7.3 billion last year, up from \$5.8 billion in 2013?

If the board overrules its staff, the federal Central Valley Project and the State Water Project would deliver roughly equal amounts of water to customers, 42,000 acre feet from each agency month at most.

Broken down further, a fourth of the State Water Project water would go to the Kern County Water Agency. The agency, in turn, would deliver 10% percent of that share to residential customers, and 90% to farmers. Increasingly, that means almonds.

Almonds occupy 148,600 acres in Kern County, or 35% of the 420,000 acres devoted to that county's top 20 crops. The Kern County's almond crop was worth \$971 million in 2013, up from \$435 million five years earlier. Given the lucrative profits, almond growers will find a way to get water.