

State water system stretched to limit, officials say

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A plan to save endangered fish has pushed California's fragile water system almost to the breaking point, putting additional strain on farmers while drawing down reservoirs at Folsom and Oroville to historically low levels.

At an informal hearing Wednesday of the State Water Resources Control Board, federal and state regulators acknowledged they're struggling to hold California's water infrastructure together amid dwindling supplies and increasing anger from farmers, legislators and others.

With the drought in its fourth year, officials said the next few weeks could prove crucial – not only for endangered fish, but also for farmers throughout California who have planted crops based on earlier expectations of more generous water supplies.

"In my business, we get no do-overs," said John Azevedo, a San Joaquin Valley farmer who is president of the Patterson Irrigation District. "I can't unplant my crops."

He and others, joined by state legislators, urged the water board to make more water available for agriculture this year, saying billions of dollars worth of crops in the ground are in danger. Environmentalists countered by saying several endangered fish species could go extinct if more water isn't earmarked for them.

At the same time, water officials said significant operational problems could occur this fall at Folsom Lake and Lake Oroville, which are being drawn down to historically low levels in an effort to cure a water-temperature problem that has left populations of endangered salmon in peril.

The conflicting demands made clear the difficulties that regulators are facing. Different elements of California's water infrastructure are inextricably linked with each other, so addressing one problem often leads to new problems elsewhere in the system.

"When you turn one dial, it impacts one other aspect of the system," said water board member Dorene D'Adamo.

Ron Milligan, operations manager of the U.S. government's Central Valley Project, which delivers millions of gallons of water from Northern California to farms and cities throughout the state, said regulators are trying to strike a balance between protecting the fish and minimizing harm to agriculture.

The entire system "is stretched to its limit, obviously," Milligan said. "We're hitting some difficult decision points."

Friction has been building throughout California's water community in recent weeks. Several agricultural districts are suing the state over the recent decision to cut off the flow of river water to senior water rights holders. Customers of the State Water Project filed a formal complaint accusing farmers in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta of using water that isn't rightfully theirs.

The latest crisis to hit water-starved California relates to the temperature of water flowing out of Lake Shasta and down the Sacramento River. Earlier this spring, officials believed they had hit on a scheme to avoid a repeat of last year, when warm water killed 95 percent of the juvenile winter-run Chinook salmon, an endangered species. The plan focused on carefully scheduling the release of water from Shasta in order to manage temperatures.

That changed in late May when the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, which operates Shasta, realized that temperatures were running warmer than previously believed. The water board then agreed to reduce the flows out of Shasta in

order to keep more cool water in the system for the summer and fall, when spawning season is at its height.

The new plan, which the water board is expected to finalize soon, is reverberating throughout California. It calls for an additional 250,000 acre-feet of water to be held back at Shasta through the end of August, raising havoc with farmers and others who were counting on the supplies. An acre-foot is about 326,000 gallons.

“They were told they were going to get a certain amount of water,” said state Sen. Anthony Cannella, R-Modesto, one of several legislators pleading with the board to release more water to their constituents. “There’s got to be a way to balance the uses.”

Assemblyman James Gallagher, R-Yuba City, said agriculture is more important than “a few degrees in Fahrenheit” to save some fish. He and others noted that an estimated 500,000 acres of land have been fallowed already this year, a figure that could grow because of the water being held behind Shasta Dam.

“There are thousands of acres that have been planted that may not get water under ... the current plan,” said Lon Martin, manager of the San Luis Water District near Los Banos.

However, environmentalists said they are concerned the new plan won’t guarantee the safety of the fish. Gary Bobker of the nonprofit Bay Institute urged the water board not to divert more water to agriculture and said hurting farmers is preferable to making a species of fish go extinct.

Agriculture “will still be here in five to 10 years,” he said.

Farmers, however, said they need at least a bit more water to get through the next few weeks, a crucial time for many of the crops in the ground. Lewis Bair, manager of Reclamation District 108, a farm district on the Sacramento River, said river flows are so low that some of the district’s pumps will soon be in danger of not working. He begged the water board for “10 days of higher flows.”

Bill Dietrich, a farmer in the Firebaugh area south of the Delta, said farmers are facing millions of dollars in potential losses. “The whole house of cards comes down if we can’t finish our crops,” he said.

The water-temperature problem is putting stress on other crucial facets of the water system. Restricting flows from Shasta means there’s less fresh water available to flow through the Delta and keep salt water out. The Delta must be kept salt-free because it’s the hub from which Northern California surface water is pumped to San Joaquin Valley farmers and millions of Southern Californians.

To compensate for the shortage of water coming from Shasta, federal and state officials have ramped up releases from the massive reservoirs at Folsom and Oroville. That’s causing fresh complications.

Federal officials said they expect Folsom to be drawn down to 120,000 acre-feet by the end of September, a record low. That will cut into the margin for error to operate the lake. Intake valves that pull water out of the lake might not function properly if it falls below 90,000 acre-feet.

Folsom is the primary water source for several Sacramento suburbs, including Roseville, Folsom and Granite Bay. “Running the lake down to 120,000 acre-feet would have devastating effects,” said Assemblywoman Beth Gaines, R-Roseville.

Felicia Marcus, chairwoman of the water board, said Sacramentans have a right to be concerned. “How can they sleep at night?” she said.

Milligan said federal officials are sensitive to the problem of eating into Folsom Lake’s operating cushion, and he believes the situation is manageable. “As a resident of Placer County, I understand their concern, he said.

One remedy under discussion is placing a temporary pumping station on a barge and floating it onto the lake to make

sure water will continue to flow to the Sacramento suburbs, he said. “If the lake level gets low enough, that would be the concept,” he said. The agency is looking at other water management solutions to alleviate some of the pressure on Folsom, he said.

Anxiety is also growing farther up the Sacramento Valley. Lake Oroville, the main reservoir of the State Water Project, is on track to be reduced to 900,000 acre-feet this summer. “That meets historical low points for Oroville,” said John Leahigh of the state Department of Water Resources, which operates the reservoir.

Much below 900,000 acre-feet, it becomes harder to operate the lake, he said. A state-run hydropower plant at Oroville will lose some of its generating capacity, he said. In addition, state officials are worried about having less water available to “carry over” to next year.

“If we get another dry year, it would be very difficult,” he said.

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