

Fish extinction 'increasingly likely'

- ENVIRONMENT

Delta smelt index sinks to zero

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It's been nearly 60 years since a species went extinct in the Delta, but the latest survey of the diminutive Delta smelt makes their demise "increasingly likely" this year, a leading expert said this week.

Researchers found one smelt in a pair of weeklong surveys across the estuary in early June. Plugging that into a weighted mathematical formula, the state Department of Fish and Wildlife calculated an index of zero for the smelt — something that had never happened before.

Smelt live only one year. So it's critical that they are able to reproduce annually. The fact that so few were found in June suggests how difficult it will be for them to find each other next spring and propagate the species, which is found nowhere else on the planet.

"Can't get much lower than zero," said Peter Moyle, a professor of fish biology at the University of California, Davis. "This index shows that extinction of smelt is increasingly likely this year. It's not gone yet, but is close."

While the tiny smelt lacks commercial or recreational value, its health is considered an indicator of the health of the Delta as a whole.

The fish has been declining for decades, but the lack of freshwater flow through the Delta during the drought has exacerbated that trend.

Lower flow allows saltwater from San Francisco Bay to creep inland. Delta smelt need fresher

water. So during a drought, they are forced to move from the Suisun Bay area farther inland, where the water may be too warm and where more predators may be lurking. Their habitat shrinks.

On top of the obvious lack of water due to the drought, state officials have temporarily loosened water flow and water quality rules in the Delta in order to hold back more water in reservoirs for human or environmental use later.

The most recent in a series of such decisions by staff at the State Water Resources Control Board acknowledged that holding back more water “will add to the already unfavorable conditions” for smelt. But the state concluded that the impacts on smelt were “not unreasonable,” considering the many competing demands for water.

Environmentalists have criticized the state’s management actions. “If the Delta smelt do survive this year, it’s not because of anything we did to protect them,” said Jon Rosenfield, a biologist with The Bay Institute.

The thicketail chub is the most recent Delta species believed to have gone extinct. It was last seen in 1957.

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