

California OKs drought curb on Sacramento River flows

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California regulators have given final approval to a controversial drought plan to restrict the flow of water pouring out of Lake Shasta this summer in a bid to preserve an endangered fish species.

The plan will effectively deprive downstream farmers of an estimated 200,000 to 250,000 acre-feet of water during the crucial months of the growing season. Officials began curbing the volume of water coming out of Shasta in late May, and the plan became official with an order signed late Tuesday by Thomas Howard, executive director of the State Water Resources Control Board.

Keeping more water in Shasta through September is a key element of a plan aimed at cooling down the Sacramento River through the spawning season of winter-run Chinook salmon. Regulators are desperate to prevent a recurrence of last year, when the river got too warm and 95 percent of the juvenile salmon were wiped out. The fish is listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act.

Farmers and elected officials have [pleaded with the water board](#) to allow more water to be released from Shasta, saying the curb on flows would devastate the agricultural economy. As news of the final decision trickled out Wednesday, they said the state's plan will make a bad situation worse.

"We're going to have some growers lose their crops," said Lon Martin, general manager of the San Luis Water District, a 65,000-acre district near Los Banos known for almonds, pistachios and other crops.

Environmentalists and the fishing industry weren't rushing to embrace the decision, either. The plan would allow water temperatures to reach as high as 58 degrees, or 2 degrees above what is normally allowed. There's no guarantee this year's winter salmon run will be protected, said John McManus, executive director of the Golden Gate Salmon Association.

"I don't know if it's going to work," McManus said. "We have to pray and hope for cooler-than-normal weather, and that's not a good strategy."

The skepticism is fueled in part by mistakes made this spring by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, which runs Shasta. After working out a temperature plan earlier in the year, the bureau discovered in May that its temperature gauges were faulty and the water coming out of Shasta was too warm. That prompted regulators to scale back the releases from Shasta, angering farmers who had planted their crops in anticipation of more generous water supplies.

Jon Rosenfield, a fish biologist at the nonprofit Bay Institute in San Francisco, said the snafu illustrates the dangers of running the system with no margin for error. He said he understands the growers' frustration.

"No one should have promised them that water," he said.

The revised plan has other ramifications. To compensate for the diminished flows out of Shasta, regulators have ramped up the volume of water pouring out of the Oroville and Folsom reservoirs in order to tamp down the salinity in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

Folsom Lake, which supplies water to 200,000 residents of the Sacramento region, is expected to drop to a record low 120,000 acre-feet this fall. That's causing considerable concern among area water officials about the availability of supply.

To ease those fears, regulators have [slowed the draining from Folsom](#) temporarily and accelerated the flows out of much-larger Lake Oroville, which feeds the State Water Project. Tuesday's order also specifies that the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, which operates Folsom, isn't allowed to reduce lake levels below that 120,000 acre-feet threshold.

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