

Tulloch Lake dropping early to cool Stanislaus River fish

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Fish concerns will force Tulloch Lake to drop sooner than water agencies had announced in a milestone spring accord, while construction work meant to ensure that 7,000 people won't run out of water for drinking and fire protection has not yet begun.

"It's absolutely critical that we get this completed prior to the end of September," Joel Metzger, spokesman for the Calaveras County Water District, said of plans to lower the lake's municipal intake pipe. He referred to the date agreed on in April after intense negotiations between state and federal water and wildlife agencies and local irrigation districts.

But the Oakdale and South San Joaquin irrigation districts in recent days announced that Tulloch's water level must come down five weeks sooner, regardless of the April agreement. State and federal agencies have deemed water temperatures in the Stanislaus River dangerously high for fish and lowering Tulloch is part of a strategy to cool the river.

The (irrigation) districts, as major diverters of water from the Stanislaus River, have a responsibility to ensure the health of the river.

Jeff Shields, general manager, South San Joaquin Irrigation District

The news – posted online Monday, mentioned at an Oakdale Irrigation District board meeting Tuesday and formally announced Friday – has caused anxiety for some residents outspoken against rules favoring rainbow trout over people.

"Everyone around the lake would give up water for farmers, but we will not give up water for a failed fish policy that doesn't work," said Jack Cox of the Lake Tulloch Alliance.

It is absolutely irresponsible.

Jack Cox, Lake Tulloch Alliance

The foothill lake between Oakdale and Jamestown is a popular spot for boating, fishing and camping, and the April accord appeared to guarantee sufficient water for recreation through the end of September.

The irrigation districts do not intend to drain Tulloch below the current location of the pipe relied on for tap water, OID General Manager Steve Knell said Friday. But he acknowledged that the districts have authority to, if push comes to shove, and the districts have made it clear that their mission is agriculture, not recreation or municipal taps.

OID whipped up a storm in February by serving notice that "draining Tulloch Reservoir by July or August" to help farmers and fish was a possibility. Neighbors reacted strongly, staging a March town hall meeting, and elected representatives on all levels, including in Washington, D.C., called for a new look at fish requirements. The Calaveras County Water District board in May ordered a 350-foot extension of its intake pipe for domestic water to a deeper spot in a nearby canyon.

That would lower the pipe's elevation from 465 feet above sea level to 420, at a cost of about \$650,000. The water district drew up plans, ordered pumps and hired a contractor, but has yet to secure a promise of state emergency drought money for which other hurting communities are competing.

I'm ticked. We're being forced to extend the intake and it's all done over fish.

Dennis Mills, board member, Calaveras County Water District

"I don't call it an intake extension; I call it a fish pump," fumed Dennis Mills, a water board member. "We wouldn't need it if it wasn't for (federal agencies) throwing all that water down the river."

The National Marine Fisheries Service, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and California State Water Board rely on provisions of the federal Endangered Species Act for fish protocol in a delicate balance of river management. It requires coordination with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, which runs huge New Melones Dam, and with the irrigation districts, whose Tri-Dam partnership owns and operates Tulloch a bit downstream.

515 Feet above sea level: tip-top of the dam at Tulloch Reservoir

507 Friday's level

480 The point to which irrigation districts intend to drop Tulloch

465 Municipal water pipe

420 Pipe location after future extension

Flows from New Melones' upper outlet lately have been too warm for fish, and its water level – although minimal because of drought – is not yet low enough to allow colder releases from its lower gates, Knell said. That's partly because Oakdale and Riverbank-area farmers have used a lot less water this year than OID initially expected. Mixing warm New Melones water with colder Tulloch water is better for fish farther down in the Stanislaus, state and federal agencies have decided.

"It's about keeping temperatures below the lethal level for fish," Knell said.

That's a different issue from the one that prompted a curious confrontation in early April between the irrigation districts and state and federal agencies. To help propel young steelhead trout toward the ocean, federal operators released from New Melones higher volume fish flows, which the irrigation districts diverted – in an act of civil disobedience – for safekeeping to locally owned Woodward Reservoir, instead of sending the extra water down the Stanislaus.

That brought all sides to the table, resulting in the key April accord allowing Tulloch neighbors to relax, for a time.

Cox and Mills said the irrigation districts should consider again defying state and federal agencies, to support residents.

Adhering to "misguided policy" in the middle of a drought is "absurd," said Cox, a former journalist and chief of staff for former Sen. Barry Goldwater Jr. "I've never seen anything like it."

It's like a normal (lake level) draw-down, except it will occur earlier (than expected).

Steve Knell, general manager, Oakdale Irrigation District

The irrigation districts plan to slowly lower Tulloch, beginning in two weeks, from its current mark of about 507 feet above sea level to 486, Knell said. Every five years, Tri-Dam draws down the level all the way to 480 feet to make sure dam spill gates are functioning properly, as required by federal powerhouse rules; that exercise is two years away, so the districts thought they'd go ahead and drop to 480 this year, and ask to reset the five-year clock.

Even 480 feet is higher than the 465-foot municipal intake, but the Calaveras water board doesn't want to take

chances. Intake pumps are covered by a giant protective screen, but suction can create a troubling vortex if the water level dips low enough.

Tulloch, whose level dips each fall and winter about 20,000 acre-feet, will drop 30,000 acre-feet this year, according to Friday's announcement. OID's February alert about the potential for "draining Tulloch Reservoir" had cited "projected savings" of 40,000 to 50,000 acre-feet, to be split between OID and SSJID.

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