

# Environmentalists sue over Sacramento River water, fish perils

By Dale Kasler  
[dkasler@sacbee.com](mailto:dkasler@sacbee.com)

Escalating the fight over California's diminished water supply, a coalition of environmental groups sued Central Valley farmers and the federal government over the possible extinction facing an endangered run of salmon.

A group led by the Natural Resources Defense Council this week filed suit in U.S. District Court in Sacramento against the Bureau of Reclamation and other federal agencies, plus a host of water districts that deliver water to farmers in the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys. The case is one of many legal squabbles over water that have broken out during the drought.

The claim: The Bureau of Reclamation, which operates the sprawling delivery network known as the Central Valley Project, is violating federal law by devoting too much water to agriculture and not enough to fish, particularly the winter-run Chinook salmon and the Delta smelt. The salmon is listed as endangered and the smelt as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. The environmentalists originally filed their lawsuit in 2005, and this week's filing represents an updated claim to emphasize the plight of the salmon as California navigates a fourth year of drought.

A shortage of cool water has left the salmon in serious peril. Despite intensive efforts by federal and state officials to control water temperatures on the Sacramento River this year, the National Marine Fisheries Service reported in late October that [vast numbers of juvenile salmon](#) have been cooked to death for the second straight spawning season.

An estimated 95 percent of the juveniles were wiped out last year, and the agency said this year's outcome could be worse, although the results won't be certain for a few weeks. Because the fish have a three-year spawning cycle, environmentalists say the salmon could face extinction in the wild, although a government-run hatchery near Shasta Dam breeds them in captivity.

"The federal government's mismanagement of limited water supplies in the ongoing drought is a near death blow for Chinook salmon and the thousands of people whose livelihood is tied to the salmon industry," Kate Poole, attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council, said in a prepared statement.

Farm groups fired back, saying agriculture agreed to keep millions of gallons of extra water in Shasta reservoir this year in an effort to keep the releases cold for the salmon. As a result, rice farmers in the Sacramento Valley fallowed about 25 percent of their land.

"Once again, we hear the unproven innuendo that rice farmers waste water. That is simply not the case," Tim Johnson, head of the California Rice Commission, said in a blog post.

Juvenile salmon generally need the Sacramento River's water to stay below 56 degrees to survive. The Bureau of Reclamation worked out a plan with Sacramento Valley farmers to hold additional water behind Shasta Dam longer than usual to keep the water cool. It started releasing water during the spring, but a few weeks later realized its temperature gauges were faulty, and the reservoir was warming too quickly. It throttled back the releases from Shasta, angering farmers, but were unable to get temperatures down consistently.

Dale Kasler: [916-321-1066](tel:916-321-1066), [@dakasler](https://twitter.com/dakasler)

"