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Water Supplies Curtailed to Protect Delta Smelt *Bay Delta Conservation Plan Seeks Solution to Conflict*

SACRAMENTO, Calif. – Water supplies from south Delta pumping facilities have been reduced significantly in early 2013 to protect Delta smelt, a threatened fish species found only in the Sacramento – San Joaquin River Delta. On Feb. 8, further restrictions were ordered as take of adult Delta smelt by the facilities approached the number allowed as incidental to project operations. As a result, water deliveries to the 25 million people and three million acres of farmland that get at least a portion of their supplies from the Delta will be reduced this year.

The pumping curtailment comes as public agencies prepare to release the latest draft of the Bay Delta Conservation Plan, a comprehensive, long-term plan for resolving such endangered species and water supply conflicts in the Delta.

Between Nov. 1, 2012 and Jan. 31, 2013, the pumping curtailment reduced deliveries from the State Water Project (SWP) and Central Valley Project (CVP) to water districts in the Central Valley, Southern California, and San Francisco Bay Area by approximately 700,000 acre-feet – enough to irrigate more than 200,000 acres of farmland or supply 1.4 million households for a year. Even with restricted pumping, the number of Delta smelt salvaged at the federal and state water projects pumps reached 232 by Feb. 6, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service determined that pumping should be curtailed even more significantly. The California Department of Water Resources and U.S. Bureau of Reclamation -- operators of the CVP and SWP, respectively – are now conferring with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on measures to protect Delta smelt and provide for the water security of California.

The situation unfolding now in the Delta, in which both native fish and water supply reliability are compromised, is what multiple parties seek to address through the Bay Delta Conservation Plan (BDCP). For the last six years, federal and state agencies, including the California Natural Resources Agency, have worked with water districts, environmental groups and other interested parties to craft this plan under the U.S. and California endangered species acts to restore the Delta ecosystem, stabilize water deliveries, and safeguard water supplies from a catastrophic flood and sea-level rise.

The BDCP considers construction of new water intake structures along the Sacramento River, 35 miles north of the existing pumping plants in the south Delta. The proposal includes three separate intakes on the river, with a combined diversion capacity of 9,000 cubic feet per second. Twin tunnels would carry water beneath the Delta to the existing CVP and SWP pumps in the south Delta.

The BDCP also proposes to create at least 100,000 acres of wildlife habitat, including the tidal marsh and inundated floodplain that provide fish shelter and food.

Modeling by the California Department of Water Resources shows that if such an alternative conveyance system had been in place this winter, the state and federal projects could have diverted approximately 700,000 acre-feet of additional water between Nov. 1, 2012 and Jan. 31, 2013 while still meeting all water quality and endangered species requirements. (Delta smelt rarely move as far north in the Sacramento River as the proposed locations considered by the BDCP.)

“This winter provides a case study in why we must find a better way to balance needs in the Delta,” said Department of Water Resources Director Mark Cowin. “The current plumbing configuration in the Delta serves neither people nor fish and wildlife well. Climate change will only increase the stress and conflict. California needs a rational discussion of the options presented by the BDCP, because to do nothing invites disaster.”

"The current approach is untenable: It too often puts our native and imperiled fish species in the West Coast's largest estuary too close to the south Delta pumps," said California Department of Fish and Wildlife Director Charlton H. Bonham. State and federal fishery agencies will continue to cast a critical eye on BDCP's specifics, but we are confident that in concept a new diversion point can reduce this conflict between a healthy estuary and water needs in our economy.”

For more information about Delta smelt, please visit http://resources.ca.gov/smelt_and_water_supply.html.

To learn more about the Bay Delta Conservation Plan, please visit www.baydeltaconservationplan.com.

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