Under the direction of Governor Gavin Newsom, state agencies are working with local water agencies, conservation groups, and federal agencies to improve habitat and water flows in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta and its major rivers. The Delta and its rivers supply 35 million people and nearly 8 million acres of farmland with water, and support hundreds of species of native fish and wildlife, many of which are in peril due to degraded environmental conditions.

Over the past several decades, populations of salmon and other native fish that migrate through or inhabit the Delta have declined dramatically, while others have been brought to the brink of extinction. Multiple factors contribute to these declines, and there is a clear need to improve environmental conditions to promote recovery of these species.

The California Natural Resources Agency and the California Environmental Protection Agency are leading an effort to negotiate voluntary agreements to improve conditions for native fish through an unprecedented commitment to increased flows for the environment, creation of 60,000 acres of new and restored habitat, and $5 billion in new funding for environmental improvements and science. If successful, these agreements will implement the State Water Resources Control Board’s legally required update to the Bay-Delta Water Quality Control Plan and improve conditions for native fish through a broad set of tools. The agreements hold the potential to achieve meaningful landscape-scale solutions to meet the needs of the Delta and its major rivers, reestablish our floodplains and wetlands to the rivers and estuary, and comprehensively manage these vital watersheds from the Sierras to the sea.

A Collaborative Approach
State agencies have developed a framework for voluntary agreements that outlines a 15-year program to improve environmental conditions, in an adaptive way, through new flows dedicated to the environment and the most extensive creation of habitat in California history. Building on years of work, the science-driven framework holds the promise to improve environmental conditions and meet the State Water Board's legal requirement to provide for reasonable protection of beneficial uses.

Six Benefits Unique to the Voluntary Agreements Framework
1. Provides a substantial “budget” of water for the environment: The VAs will provide substantial additional flows dedicated to the environment. These flows will be strategically deployed to interact with existing and new habitat to amplify the benefit and provide substantial ecosystem improvements—all guided by a new governance, science, and adaptive management program.
2. Creates significant new habitat: The VAs will significantly expand habitat to support the recovery of imperiled fish populations and promote the return of bountiful food supplies for these species. Habitat improvements include: the creation of spawning and rearing habitat for salmon to improve survival and growth; installation of fish screen projects to prevent migrating fish from becoming trapped in water diversions; restoration and reactivation of floodplains and tidal wetlands to improve fish health and bolster fish food production; and the implementation of fish passage improvement projects to allow migrating salmon to pass unimpeded from their spawning areas to the ocean and back.

3. Enables new and more collaborative science: The VAs call for an additional $285 million dollars to fund a collaborative science program to maximize the environmental and ecosystem benefits from flow and habitat-related measures. This shared program augments existing monitoring and science programs and will be guided by an inclusive body of state and federal agency scientists, water users, and conservation groups.

4. Expands tools to recover fish populations: The VAs establish a collaborative decision-making approach to adaptively manage flows and habitat using monitoring and science. In addition to providing new water for managed flows, the agreements include measures such as pulse flows, reservoir reoperation, groundwater banking, and reduced diversions.

5. Substantially increases funding for environmental improvements: The VAs call for large, sustained investments to improve environmental conditions. Water managers have agreed to self-assess in order to fund additional flows dedicated to the environment, habitat improvements as well as new monitoring and science. The state has also made a $2 billion financial commitment for habitat improvements and science.

6. Expedite implementation: The decline of salmon and native species in the Delta and its major rivers requires immediate action. The framework could deliver water and habitat on a faster timeline than the traditional regulatory pathway.

What are the Next Steps?
- In coming weeks and months, the California Natural Resources Agency and the California Environmental Protection Agency will work with water users and other participants to refine a proposed framework into a legally enforceable program.
- The framework will serve as the basis to further develop a legally enforceable set of voluntary agreements that will undergo a third-party scientific review, an environmental review process, and a public approval process by the State Water Board.
- If approved by the State Water Board, the agreements could be implemented right away. Consistent with applicable laws, some early implementation actions could also take place to accelerate the achievements of environmental and biological goals and targets.
Examples of Habitat Improvements

- Creation and restoration of channels to provide rearing habitat where juvenile fish can take up residence and utilize the area for feeding, shelter and growth.
- Addition of gravel and other improvements to riverbeds to enhance conditions for spawning salmon.
- Construction of fish screens to protect migrating fish from water diversions in the Delta and its watersheds.
- Removal of barriers that have blocked fish from accessing historical spawning and rearing habitats.
- Reactivating floodplains and tidal wetlands to spread out and slow down water across the landscape to mimic natural flows and provide multiple benefits.

Lake Shasta
Sacramento River
San Francisco
Sacramento/San Joaquin Delta
Mokelumne River
Tuolumne River
San Joaquin River
Friant Dam
New Bullards Bar Dam
Croft Dam
Putah Creek
American River
Feather River
Yuba River