

Solving western water supply problems remains an ongoing debate

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Water supply remained a hotly debated topic in the House Natural Resources Committee on Water, Power, and Oceans Subcommittee. During an oversight hearing on Changing Demands and Water Supply Uncertainty in California, members and witnesses discussed conflicting proposals between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) on water release from the Shasta Dam. The process is currently managed by the Bureau of Reclamation (USBR) through a planned water delivery schedule. The Shasta Dam is part of the Central Valley Project, which is responsible for transporting water from Northern California reservoirs to population centers and agricultural regions farther south.

Due to five years of drought in California, water supplies are increasingly limited. Federal agencies have struggled to manage demand from the farming community, while also protecting endangered species that rely on the same water sources. According to Jeffrey Sutton, general manager for the Tehama-Colusa Canal Authority, drought conditions have resulted in a reduction in water allocations, “causing a lack of certainty and an absolute tragedy [for farmers].” Even some senior water rights holders, who have first claim to withdraw water over holders who have filed later claims, and own what are called junior water rights, have seen their water allocations reduced.

The USFWS proposes releasing more water into the Pacific Ocean to increase flow and improve conditions for the Delta smelt, an endangered and native species in the upper Sacramento-San Joaquin Estuary of California. The NMFS, however, wishes to hold back water through the summer and fall to preserve cold water for the winter-run Chinook salmon, a species that sustains 30,000 jobs and contributes \$1 billion to the West Coast fishing economy, according to Bob Borck, a Pacific Ocean fisherman. On June 28, NMFS approved a revised operation plan from the Bureau of Reclamation although an agreement has not yet been reached with USFWS.

Separately, the state of California has released its own Delta Smelt Resiliency Strategy, which proposes measures to boost populations of the smelt through habitat enhancement and predator removal, among other tactics.

One solution seeks to create a single USFWS-NMFS plan. Representative Paul Gosar (R-AZ) proposed merging the two agencies’ responsibilities under the Endangered Species Act to improve collaboration. Alternatively, Representative Jim Costa (D-CA) suggested removing predators of the smelt and improving habitat rather than focusing on water release, claiming that “continuing to do what we’ve always done and expecting a different result... is the definition of insanity.”

Sources: California Department of Fish and Wildlife; Denver Water; E&E Daily; House Water, Power, and Oceans Subcommittee; National Ocean and Atmospheric Administration; The Sacramento Bee; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

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