

Smelt-down fires up Delta tunnel talk

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Struggling each day to protect fish while providing water for two-thirds of California, state officials once more called Tuesday for fundamentally changing the way water is conveyed past the Delta by building \$14 billion twin tunnels.

A total of 232 threatened Delta smelt have been killed since December in the huge export pumps near Tracy, triggering mandatory restrictions in how much water can be pumped south.

Deliveries have been cut by more than 700,000 acre-feet, roughly enough water to supply nine cities the size of Stockton for a year.

And while the pumping restrictions intensify, winter has taken an extended break. The Sierra snowpack has dwindled from nearly 140 percent of normal at the start of January to 78 percent of normal on Tuesday.

It's unclear the degree to which the decrease in Delta pumping will harm cities and farms south of the estuary. But every drop that can't be pumped now is one less drop stored for later.

"I have no doubt that the loss of 700,000 acre-feet (of water) will have direct economic effects on California," said Mark Cowin, director of the state Department of Water Resources.

Officials used the increasingly serious situation to promote the Bay Delta Conservation Plan, which would shift the point at which the water is diverted to a location on the Sacramento River near Hood, in the north Delta. The water would then flow through twin tunnels to the existing pumps.

That would prevent smelt - which are notoriously bad swimmers - from getting sucked into the dead-end channels and sloughs leading to their demise.

"If you're a smelt and you end up in the south Delta near those pumps, it's bad for you," said Chuck Bonham, director of the state Department of Fish and Wildlife. "Two of three fish that get trapped down there die. ... We know this is a problem that will continue to come up in the future. Let's break that cycle."

The first smelt died at the pumps on Dec. 12. Five days later, officials instituted restrictions on pumping.

Those restrictions were ratcheted up last week when smelt continued to get sucked into the pumps, despite the previous cutbacks.

Big December storms might have drawn the fish into the area, but officials said it's unclear why they were still being killed last week. None have been taken the past few days.

Under a permit to operate the pumps, no more than 305 smelt can be killed this year. Seventy-five percent of that quota has already been exhausted, and smelt could be in the danger zone near the pumps for another two months.

It's easy to dismiss smelt as small and insignificant, but the species is an indicator of the overall health of the Delta as well as a key player in the amount of water available.

Tunnel opponents point out that other species may be affected by the massive project - like salmon, which swim up and down the Sacramento right past the proposed intake.

Those opponents have long called for building better fish screens on the existing pumps instead, and for reducing the overall amount of water taken from the Delta.

"There is no solution to taking half the water out of the estuary," said Stockton's Bill Jennings, head of the California Sportfishing Protection Alliance.

For S.J. County, the impacts of the tunnels plan extend far beyond fish. The plan also calls for converting valuable farmland to wetland habitat. Critics warn that a decrease in freshwater flow through the Delta would harm the county's economy and quality of life.

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