

---

# The Record

---

Friday, January 11, 2008

## Delta report reveals ‘most depressing’ fish data

By *Alex Breitler*  
Record Staff Writer

A handful of ecologically key Delta fish continue to dwindle, with one species declining to a record low, the state Department of Fish and Game said Thursday.

Data from surveys conducted last fall confirm the decline not only of species such as the Delta smelt, a minnow with little ostensible value, but also striped bass, which is prized by fishermen.

“It’s disappointing, but not surprising,” Fish and Game supervising biologist Marty Gingras said about the recent figures.

Longfin smelt was the fish of greatest concern, he said. Population estimates for fall 2007 were lower than any other year since the surveys began in 1967.

The Delta smelt’s continued decline, meanwhile, bodes poorly for the state’s water supply. A federal judge last summer ordered reductions in water exports to millions of Californians to protect that fish, which is listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

This week’s numbers represent “one of the most depressing sets of data I’ve ever seen,” said Tina Swanson, a biologist with the conservation group The Bay Institute.

“A lot of people are saying, Why all the fuss about Delta smelt? It’s one fish,” she said. “These numbers show it’s about more than one fish.”

In addition to young striped bass and longfin and Delta smelt, American shad and splittail declined in 2007.

The only fish on the upswing was the threadfin shad, which nevertheless is about 20 percent of its population a decade ago.

State water officials are scheduled to hold a hearing on the ongoing fish decline Jan. 22 in Sacramento. Experts have suggested a number of potential reasons, including water exports, poor water quality, toxic runoff and invasive species.

The latest numbers are not merely a call to action, The Bay Institute’s Swanson said; they are the Delta’s “scream of anguish.”