

# The Record

Thursday, Mar 9, 2006

## Endangered status sought for Delta smelt Heavy water exports cited in emergency bid

Warren Lutz  
Record Staff Writer

---

STOCKTON - Several environmental groups asked federal officials Wednesday to make the dwindling Delta smelt an endangered species, a move they hope results in less Delta water pumped to Southern California.

Water exports to 23 million Californians move through large pumps near Tracy. Those pumps and water exports are one of several factors tied to the declining numbers of smelt, a tiny, translucent blue fish that is viewed as an indicator of the Delta's overall health.

Numbers of Delta smelt, already listed as a threatened species, plummeted to historic lows last fall. The 42-page petition includes the charge that water exports played a direct role in the smelts' plight.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has three months to decide whether to consider the request.

Tina Swanson, a biologist with The Bay Institute, one of the groups behind the request, said research showed that when winter water exports were high, smelt numbers dropped the next fall.

The population decline "really shouldn't be a surprise," Swanson said.

"It was essentially predictable on the basis of these really high exports."

An "endangered" listing provides almost the same protections as a "threatened" listing. However, threatened species can suffer "incidental losses," while endangered species cannot. That higher threshold may be important for the fish, which has a life span of just one to two years.

The Center for Biological Diversity and the Natural Resources Defense Council joined The Bay Institute in the request.

It's unclear whether agencies that rely on Delta water will protest their effort. But Dan Nelson, executive director of the San Luis and Delta-Mendota Water Authority, which represents 32 agencies that receive Delta water, blasted what he called the environmentalists' "tunnel vision" on pumping as the chief villain behind the smelts' decline.

A team of state scientists recently identified water exports, pollutants and invasive species as possible contributors to the problem. Nelson said utility plants in Contra Costa County were killing fish, too. Fish have been known to die when caught in the plants' water intake pipes.

"There has been an overemphasis on the impacts from the (export) pumps," he said. "As a result, we have neglected looking into what appears to be the true culprits - that is, the toxins, the food deprivation and the power plants."

Nelson said his agency reduced pumping by an average of 500,000 acre-feet every year to protect the smelt, an amount that added up to \$150 million in lost water over the past six years. That's enough water for as many as 1 million families a year.

The petition doesn't cite pumps as the only problem. "But it is significant, and it does explain part of the trend," Swanson said.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service spokesman Al Donner said his agency would give the petition "full consideration."

But there's a backlog of similar petitions, and Fish and Wildlife officials were already reconsidering the smelts' status under the Endangered Species Act, Donner said.

There already are rules against harming threatened animals, he added.

"From our perspective, the species currently has protection," he said.