



FRIDAY
November 14, 2008

The San Diego

Union-Tribune.

COUNTY FINAL
50¢
PER COPY

Water supplies may drop for Calif. cities, farms

By Garance Burke
UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

FRESNO — California fish and wildlife managers on Friday approved new rules that could severely restrict pumping from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta to protect a native fish, triggering protests from farmers and cities reeling already from water shortages.

The Fish and Game Commission voted 3-0 to enact emergency regulations that may scale back water pumping from December through February to safeguard the longfin smelt, considered a bellwether species for the estuary.

“Clearly as a society we haven’t erred on the side of the fish in the past; we’ve erred on the side of the water supply,” said Commissioner Michael Sutton. “We have to come down on the side of the fish. If we don’t take care of these ecosystems, they’re not going to yield us the services for much longer.”

Pumping restrictions would only kick in if scientists find a certain number of dead or living longfin smelt in various sampling locations throughout the delta, including near the massive pumps that send water to more than 25 million Southern Californians.

Water officials say they expect some reductions will happen.

The regulations could slash state and federal water deliveries by up to 1.1 million acre feet, bringing California’s total water supply to slightly more than half of what it would be in an average year.

That’s in addition to recent water cutbacks imposed by the state Department of Water Resources, which plans to deliver just 15 percent of the amount that local water agencies request every year.

The combination “could create a water supply and delivery crisis the likes of which Californians have not seen in decades,” warned Director Lester Snow in a statement.

Another dry winter may prompt widespread water rationing in cities from the San Francisco Bay area to San Diego, and a drop in the diversity of crops planted over the coming months, said Carl Torgersen, who operates the State Water Project for the department.

Major agriculture groups said new cuts could cripple farming families already struggling to do business since a federal judge ordered federal and state agencies to restrict pumping last year to protect the threatened delta smelt, the longfin’s cousin.

“So much uncertainty around the water supply will make it hard for farmers to get crop loans,” said Sarah Woolf, a spokeswoman for the Westlands Water District. “Growers will have to give their first priority to permanent crops like almonds and pistachios and grapes, rather than planting things like lettuce and broccoli.”

The new regulations for longfin smelt will be in force only while the fish migrate, spawn and hatch in the estuary, for a 90-day period starting Dec. 1.

If scientists find fish in dangerous conditions during that timeframe, the rules will trigger an evaluation process that involves five state and federal agencies and ultimately falls to Department of Fish and Game Director Don Koch for a final decision.

Koch said he reserves the right to take no action, especially if a forthcoming federal plan to protect the delta smelt is found to also protect the longfin.

Until Feb. 4, when the commission is scheduled to decide whether the longfin smelt qualifies for listing under the state Endangered Species Act, the fish will enjoy the same protections as endangered species. In the meantime, any dredging in the estuary also will be temporarily

banned so the species' floating larvae can develop safely.

Laura King Moon, whose organization represents districts that provide water to Los Angeles and Alameda counties, said the regulations risked slowing California's economy in the midst of a downturn.

"This may not be felt in residential

neighborhoods immediately, but it will add to our cities' calls for increased voluntary conservation and increase water prices," said King Moon, assistant general manager of the State Water Contractors. "This will eat further into drought reserves that have been set aside in the event of another dry year."

Without the protections, however,

biologists warned the silvery, 5-inch-long fish might not survive.

The population of the longfin smelt is 3 percent of the level measured less than 20 years ago, according to a petition filed by the Center of Biological Diversity, which asked the commission to list the species as endangered.