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NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

Pumps' fish slaughter alarms conservationists

- Kelly Zito, Chronicle Staff Writer

The giant pumps propelling water to some of California's biggest cities and farming districts trapped and killed 6 million young splittail last month, enraging conservation groups and further stoking the fiery debate over operation of the state's sprawling water system.

The killings are also renewing calls to relist the splittail - a native California species in the minnow family - as officially threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

In addition to the splittail, the pumps have killed tens of thousands of imperiled chinook salmon since October, officials said.

"This was supposed to be a rebuilding year for salmon and splittail," said Jeff Miller, conservation advocate for the Center for Biological Diversity in San Francisco. "But if they're getting massacred at the pumps, there aren't going to be enough for the populations to rebound."

This latest dustup over fish species in California is inextricably linked to broader questions about how to divvy up the water



Delbert Hansen (left) and Bill Smith prep fish for return to the delta at the Tracy Fish Collection Facility.

that surges through the 700,000-acre Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. On one side are the cities and farms in the Bay Area, Southern California and Central Valley, which seek to slurp up ever more water. On the other side are the animals that forage, migrate and breed in the most important and fragile estuary on the West Coast. Many observers see the plight of the splittail, like that of the delta smelt, as a measure of the delta's decline in the face of too-aggressive human consumption.

Species delisted

The splittail was designated a threatened species by the federal government in 1999. But in 2003, the Bush administration stripped the splittail's protections in a controversial report that later prompted charges of influence peddling. A 2007 investigation found that a high-level administration official, who owned a Solano County farm in a floodplain that could prove important habitat to the splittail, tampered with the decision. Nevertheless, the Obama administration last fall upheld the delisting, calling the splittail one of the most abundant species in the delta.

Indeed, state and federal scientists say the recent spike in splittail "salvage" - the technical term for the fish entrained or killed at the pumping facilities near Tracy - is actually a good sign. It shows that the splittail, a wide-ranging, prolific fish that can grow to 12 inches long and live for up to 5 years, has the resilience and hardiness to climb back after several years of falling numbers.

Over one five-day period in May - the species' peak spawning month - more than 2.8 million splittail died or were ensnared at the pumping site, according to data compiled by the state. For the entire month, the number totaled about 6 million.

"You never want to pooh-pooh a 6 million salvage number," said Steve Martarano, spokesman for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "But it shows that there are a lot of splittail out there."

Environmental groups point out, however, that no one has any clue just how many splittail live in the estuary. The fish killed at the pumps this year could represent a very large or very small proportion of the total. What's more, during recent drought years, fall fish surveys have turned up only a handful of adult splittails - or none at all.

"They are a boom and bust fish - the numbers always go up in high water years," said Dan Bacher, regular contributor to the Fish Sniffer sportfishing magazine. "But 700,000 killed in one day? That's alarming."

The killing of the chinook salmon is even more vexing. Since October, about 50,000 of the prized fish have been sucked into the maze of screens, pipes and holding tanks operated by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and the state Department of Water Resources.

Rapid rise

The numbers rose so quickly in May that pumping rates had to be reduced to about 2,500 cubic feet per second - down from the usual 9,200 cubic feet per second -

in order to remain below the federally permitted number of casualties for spring and winter run salmon, steelhead and sturgeon, according to Bruce Oppenheim, fisheries biologist with the National Marine Fisheries Service. (A large portion of the salmon were likely fall run, Oppenheim said, which are not covered by federal safeguards.)

Subsequent declines in chinook kills at the pumps demonstrate that regulators are doing a good job of stemming the fish deaths, Oppenheim said.

To Miller, however, the pumping cutbacks prove that California's thirst is simply unquenchable and that its water-delivery system must be permanently overhauled before too many more animals and ecosystems disappear.

"There's no excuse for operating a pumping system that entrains and kills so many fish," he said. "It's a travesty."