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Federal Officials Revisit Sacramento, Calif.-Area Habitat Protections

Stuart Leavenworth

Mar. 6--The deaths of thousands of young fish in the American River are prompting some environmentalists and federal officials to rethink water allocations that favor habitat in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta over tributaries upstream.

By Stuart Leavenworth, The Sacramento Bee, Calif.

Mar. 6--The deaths of thousands of young fish in the American River are prompting some environmentalists and federal officials to rethink water allocations that favor habitat in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta over tributaries upstream.

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation last month upped water flows from Folsom Dam to meet water-quality standards to protect fish in the Delta.

In so doing, it flooded gravel bars along the American River that became habitat for spawning steelhead trout, an endangered species. The fish laid their eggs in the gravel, only to have the river recede a few weeks later.

Thousands of newborn salmon were also left stranded in tiny pools last week, many eaten by gulls.

State and federal biologists are still studying how many fish died. All agree, however that well-intentioned regulations to protect the Delta are complicating efforts to make the American River more friendly to fish.

"There's no question there needs to be a new look at the (Delta) standard," said Felix Smith, a retired federal biologist and leader of Save the American River.

Imperiled fish need good habitat both upstream and downstream, but the Delta standard "tends to pit one against the other," said John Baker, a biologist for the National Marine Fisheries Service in Sacramento.

At issue is a regulation that requires state and federal agencies to release extra water into the Delta during years of high rainfall and snowfall. A key part of the 1994 Bay-Delta Accord, the regulation is aimed at helping Delta fish forage and reproduce in freshwater parts of the Delta that would otherwise be too salty.

The regulation kicked in because of a wet December 2002, requiring state and federal agencies to provide 30 days of extra flows to the Delta. Folsom was the first federal reservoir tapped, since it sits closer to the Delta than any other.

On Feb. 10, bureau officials increased American River flows from 3,500 to 5,500

cubic feet per second. On Feb. 21, they started "ramping down" the flows, going from 4,500 to 2,500 cfs over a period of six days, according to documents provided by the bureau.

In reducing the flows, the bureau followed all requirements of a "biological opinion" for endangered steelhead, said Jeff McCracken, a spokesman for the agency. Baker, who works for the National Marine Fisheries Service, agreed.

State Fish and Game officials, however, say they warned bureau officials that, regardless of regulations, the reductions could imperil endangered steelhead that were at the peak of their spawning.

Environmentalists say the bureau, instead of going by the book, could have been more prudent in this situation.

"The whole idea is to get as much spawning stock as we can," said Smith. "That way, we can get these fish off the endangered species list."

This is not a new problem.

According to a lengthy report by the state Fish and Game Department in 2001, strandings of fish "are a regular occurrence in the lower American River" and "have the potential to incur significant losses of salmon and steelhead."

To protect fish during critical spawning periods, that report recommended the bureau not reduce flows faster than 100 cfs over an hour's time. Bureau officials have complied with that request but can't follow other recommendations, such as avoiding flows above 4,000 cfs during critical spawning times.

McCracken said the bureau often must release extra water to create flood-control storage, meet the Delta requirements or meet other mandates. "We are trying to do the right thing, but it is a tough job," he said.

Fisheries advocates acknowledge that some river fluctuations are unavoidable, especially when the bureau must release water from Folsom Lake to protect storage space to try to prevent a dangerous flood.

But fish strandings at other times could be avoided, they say, if federal water managers made fish a higher priority.

In recent years, a consortium of water districts, environmentalists and developers has been negotiating with the bureau on a new flow standard for the American River. Known as the Water Forum, the consortium hopes to create better river habitat as part of a multifaceted program to resolve water disputes, protect groundwater and provide reliable water supplies.

Bureau officials are also installing a \$2.3 million device on Folsom Dam to help them better regulate the temperature of water released downstream. In the past, warm water from Folsom Lake has hurt the spawning of fish, particularly fall-run Chinook salmon that arrive in late September, when water at the surface of the reservoir is at its warmest.

Any changes in the Delta standard, however, would have to come at the behest of Cal-Fed, a multiagency effort to restore the Delta. It also would require the approval of the State Water Resources Control Board.

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