

United States Department of the Interior
Statement Before the State Water Resources Control Board
Review of 1995 Delta Water Quality Control Plan
Topic #9: Flow Objectives in the San Joaquin River at Airport Way Bridge,
Vernalis: 31-day pulse flow April 15 – May 15
January 24, 2005

A decade ago, the State Water Resources Control Board (SWRCB) adopted the Delta Water Quality Control Plan (1995 WQCP), which included several flow objectives to protect beneficial uses of river and Delta waters by the State's fishery resources. The San Joaquin River at Vernalis flow objectives April 15 – May 15, commonly known as the San Joaquin River pulse period, are primarily intended to maintain sufficient net downstream flows in the lower San Joaquin River to facilitate juvenile Chinook salmon downstream migration. Implementation of these flow objectives provide concurrent benefits for federally listed delta smelt.

The San Joaquin River pulse period flows are currently being implemented pursuant to the San Joaquin River Agreement using a consensus-based approach among a group of agricultural, urban, environmental and governmental interests. A key part of this agreement is the Vernalis Adaptive Management Plan (VAMP) which is designed to provide adequate flows for juvenile Chinook salmon emigration while gathering more information that will be considered in future water management decisions to protect juvenile salmon. VAMP employs an adaptive management strategy to evaluate how salmon survival rates change in response to alterations in San Joaquin River flows and Central Valley Project (CVP)/State Water Project (SWP) exports with the installation of the Head of Old River barrier. The specific objectives, study design and implementation of VAMP are provided to the SWRCB in an annual report documenting the implementation and results of the VAMP program. The Fish and Wildlife Service will provide a compact disk (CD) to the SWRCB with several biological references.

Recommendation

Interior believes the San Joaquin River at Vernalis flow objectives April 15 – May 15 provide important protection for emigrating juvenile Chinook salmon with concurrent benefits for federally listed delta smelt. Therefore, we are recommending no changes at this time. Interior is committed to the San Joaquin River Agreement adaptive management structure through 2012. Interior will continue to participate in the collaborative implementation of VAMP each year to provide annual pulse flow fishery benefits while continuing to evaluate information produced from current management framework to better assess the appropriate long term San Joaquin River flow needs and CVP/SWP export levels. Interior therefore recommends that the VAMP continue to be implemented consistent with the San Joaquin River Agreement to provide these important SWRCB WQCP Vernalis flow objectives April 15 – May 15.