

California State Water Resources Board Votes to Cut Water to Farms and Bay Area Cities

California's State Water Resources Control Board voted to approve the Bay-Delta plan, which will re-allocate billions of gallons of water from farms and cities to enhance the environment. Authorities say that dwindling fish populations justify this action.

The state plans to double the present water flow to the ocean during dry periods, which will cause an estimated 40% reduction of water to the San Francisco area. A torrent of lawsuits are [sic] expected. The Trump administration, which has spoken in favor of more water for farms, has threatened to sue over the Bay Delta Plan. -GEG

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SF, other cities consider lawsuits to head off water restrictions

Kurtis Alexander | Dec 14, 2018



Old River runs through farmland outside Discovery Bay in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, one of the waterways that the State Water Resources Control Board seeks to protect by reducing the supply to cities. Photo: Carlos Avila Gonzalez/The Chronicle

Employees of Scott Seus's farm are seen harvesting mint outside of Tulelake, CA, on July 12th, 2018. Seus is a third-generation Tulelake farmer who grows mint, horseradish and onions. He's planted less this year because of the lack of water. Wright is a longtime rancher who is suffering from less water. Photo: Justin Maxon / Special to The Chronicle





A boat sits off the marshes near Big Break Marina in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta near Antioch. The State Water Resources Control Board is trying to prevent the collapse of the delta. Photo: Carlos Avila Gonzalez/The Chronicle

The cities and towns hit this week with stiff demands to reduce water use, including San Francisco, say they'll work with state regulators to meet the charge, but they're also looking at the possibility of lawsuits.

The State Water Resources Control Board approved a [far-reaching plan](#) Wednesday to improve the health of California's rivers and fish by limiting the amount of water that dozens of communities take from four major waterways.

While the plan leaves room for negotiating the extent of the water reductions, the agencies that draw from the San Joaquin River and its tributaries say legal action may be a necessary backstop in case they're forced to cut more than they can afford.

"At the end of the day, we do serve our customers and we have to do what's best for the community," said Samantha Wookey, spokeswoman for the Modesto Irrigation District, one of the state's biggest water suppliers and now subject to restrictions on the Tuolumne River.

San Francisco, which also relies on the Tuolumne River and faces cutbacks, has begun evaluating whether a lawsuit is appropriate, according to the city attorney's office.

Under the state plan, San Francisco residents and businesses could face reductions of 40 percent or more during prolonged dry periods, [according to estimates from the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission](#).

The aim of the state water board is to prevent the collapse of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. The sprawling estuary, which serves as a hub of state water supplies and is a vital conduit for threatened salmon, has suffered from too little water and too much contamination amid heavy pumping.

While the water board's plan would saddle water users with restrictions to boost flows into the delta, regulators introduced leniency Wednesday in an effort to head off litigation, which would result in years of delay in the plan's implementation. The board stipulated that it will attempt to integrate proposals by water agencies to trade habitat restoration for smaller water reductions.

It appears, though, the board's strategy may not have worked.

Ever since the water board began updating its plan a decade ago, it has had to maneuver a path between water users who don't want limits on their draws and fishermen and environmentalists who want substantial caps.

The conservation community also presents a threat for legal action, with many having committed to suing if the environmental safeguards approved Wednesday are weakened.

The Bay Delta Plan calls for maintaining an average of 40 percent of the natural flow of the San Joaquin River and its tributaries during peak spring runoff. Currently, the flows average 20 percent or less because of diversions. Sometimes the waterways dry up entirely.

The plan could change as the state looks at amendments pitched by water agencies.

For years, the state board has been urging suppliers to come up with their own ideas for fixing California's declining river system. At Wednesday's meeting, more than a dozen water departments, with help from the state Natural Resources Agency, laid out a framework for restoration that included money for habitat improvements and a commitment to less pumping. The board asked the agencies to flesh out their initiative by March.

Officials at the SFPUC, who are working on amendments, say they won't be able to hit the state's 40 percent flow target. But they say they're looking to leave more water in the Tuolumne River and restore salmon habitat in a plan they believe will meet the water board's conservation goal.

"There are other areas we can explore on how we do long-term management," said Michael Carlin, deputy general manager of the SFPUC. "That's where we're going to be spending our time over the next several months: to get something more detailed."

Still, the compromise plan probably would mean significant water cuts for San Francisco households. During a drought, customers may have to reduce water use by 30 percent, Carlin said.

Water rates would probably rise as the city develops new sources to make up for lost supplies.