

Feds release Calif. plan to protect chinook salmon

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(AP) -- Federal fisheries regulators on Thursday released a court-ordered plan to help struggling chinook salmon that includes opening California dams and restricting pumping, which would reduce the amount of water available to farms and urban areas.

The National Marine Fisheries Service also recommends a new water temperature management plan for the upper Sacramento River and Shasta Reservoir, among other changes.

Don Glaser, regional director for the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, which manages some of the dams involved said the bureau has "provisionally accepted" the findings and will "implement actions required to meet the needs of the listed species." Glaser said the bureau will not formally accept the findings until staff reads the entire 800 pages of the opinion.

The fisheries service had to redo its management plan for [salmon](#) after a federal judge in Fresno threw out its previous plan last year. U.S. District Judge Oliver Wanger found that allowing Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta water pumps and dams to continue operating as they have would threaten the imperiled species.

The fisheries service estimates that state and federal water regulators will lose 5 to 7 percent of the already limited water they have to manage under the new plan. Pumping restrictions this year due to another protected species, the delta smelt, already have meant a 17 to 20 percent reduction in water supply, said Ted Thomas, a spokesman for the state

Department of Water Resources.

These restrictions will likely result in increased rates for urban customers as well as farmers, and more rationing and restrictions in the future.

[California](#) water regulators and Central Valley lawmakers immediately criticized the plan.

"The new opinion ... further chips away at our ability to provide a reliable water supply for California," said state Department of Water Resources Director Lester Snow.

He argued that a multi-species approach - one that combines the court-mandated water pumping restrictions for the delta smelt with salmon and other species protections - would be the best way to achieve habitat and conservation while maintaining a reliable water source.

California is trying to eventually do that. State officials said Thursday they are working to draft a long-term plan to preserve species and ecosystems in the delta that would also set guidelines for pumping levels that meet federal and state wildlife laws.

Fall-run chinook salmon populations returning to the Central Valley to spawn have declined steeply over the past seven years, down to about 66,000 salmon adults returning to the Sacramento River in 2008 from more than 750,000 adult salmon in 2002.

The decline of fall, spring and winter-run salmon - which return from the sea to lay eggs in their native freshwater habitat - is blamed on a lack of water and increased water temperature caused by the vast series of pumps and canals used to move the precious resource around.

The fisheries service determined that the current water pumping

operations by the federal Central Valley Project and the State Water Project need to be changed to protect a number of endangered or threatened species including winter and spring-run chinook salmon, Central Valley steelhead, green sturgeon and killer whales, which feed on salmon.

The opinion said the dams and pumps trap out-migrating juvenile salmon in the delta, where they can die before they reach the sea. Fishermen groups and environmentalists have argued for years that salmon need more water for an uninterrupted transit through the delta.

Representatives for commercial fishermen, who have not been able to fish for two seasons because salmon have been so scarce, applauded the plan.

"All these people, all these small communities on the coast of California depend on these salmon for their livelihoods," said Larry Collins, a San Francisco-based fisherman and vice president of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations.

"Everybody needs these fish. We've got to put [water](#) back in the river," he said.

Associated Press writer Garance Burke in Fresno contributed to this report.

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