

More bad news on California salmon

December 16 2015, by Dale Kasler, The Sacramento Bee

California drought regulators, deliberating on a controversial plan to withhold water from farms and cities next year to preserve an endangered species of salmon, were handed a fresh dose of bad news Tuesday: The fish are doing worse than previously believed.

In 2014, about 95 percent of the juvenile winter-run Chinook [salmon](#) died because [drought conditions](#) made the Sacramento River too warm to sustain them. And this year's run has fared even worse: The National Marine Fisheries Service estimated there are 29 percent fewer juvenile salmon in the river compared with a year ago.

Because the salmon have only a three-year spawning cycle, 2016 is shaping up as a critical year for the fish, who are protected under the federal Endangered Species Act. "There's been the 'e-word' tossed around, extinction," said Garwin Yip, a branch chief with the fisheries agency, in testimony before the State Water Resources Control Board.

In an effort to keep the fish alive, the [water](#) board is expected to vote on a proposal to hold back more water at Lake Shasta next summer. Holding more water at Shasta is designed to ensure the water that is released is colder, giving the juvenile salmon a better chance at survival.

The water board hopes the plan will "create a margin of safety for fish and wildlife," said Diane Riddle, environmental program manager.

But holding back more water at Shasta also would mean less water for downstream farms and cities. Farm groups have complained the Shasta

plan likely would mean even more fallowing of farmland in 2016; more than 500,000 acres were idled this year.

Meanwhile, environmental groups said the board's plan doesn't go far enough to preserve the salmon.

Water board officials stressed that the plan would take effect only if conditions stay dry and El Nino rains don't materialize as forecast. If precipitation is heavy, the agency is prepared to tweak the plan.

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