

FEARS OVER WATER RISE FROM DROP TO STREAM

NEW MELONES SET TO HIT 18-YEAR LOW; FARMERS PREPARE FOR VERY DRY FUTURE



The San Joaquin River southwest of Manteca on Thursday. MICHAEL McCOLLUM/The Record

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From the bathtub rings around our reservoirs, to the salty Delta lapping up against our levees, there is ample evidence that in the span of just two years California's water supply has shifted from wealth to want.

The state has not formally declared a drought, but water managers are using words like "dire" to describe the situation - particularly if next winter disappoints.

By summer's end, New Melones Lake east of Stockton will sink to an 18-year low, jeopardizing a portion of the city's water supply next year.

New Melones is also key to meeting water quality goals downstream, in the south Delta. Less water from the reservoir allows saltwater from San Francisco Bay to invade the estuary, and one farmer said river levels have dropped below the intakes to her pumps, making it difficult to irrigate her fields.

Farther south, farmers on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley who rely on exports from the Delta have a 20 percent allocation this year and are bracing for the possibility of no water at all next year.

Already, state officials have been forced to make hard decisions about how limited water should be used.

Late in the spring, they agreed to ignore water quality standards in the west and central Delta in order to hold back more water in Lake Shasta, the state's largest reservoir. They were worried that Shasta will become so depleted that it won't have enough cold water to protect endangered winter-run Chinook in the Sacramento River.

Environmentalists and Delta advocates note that despite that maneuver, and the potential threat to fish, the state is still managing to export significant volumes of water from the Delta to farms and cities mostly south of the estuary.

Ultimately, the fact that all this is happening just two years after reservoirs were full to the brim is not a good sign, said John Herrick, a Stockton attorney who represents farmers in the south Delta.

"The system is collapsing," Herrick said. "There are so many commitments for water that now we're seeing regularly, sadly, this huge gap in supply versus demand."

Two years' time

New Melones can hold a maximum 2.4 million acre-feet of water. It was virtually full on July 10, 2011.

By the end of this summer the reservoir is expected to drop well below 1 million acre-feet. That hasn't happened since March 30, 1995.

Jeff Shields, general manager of the South San Joaquin Irrigation District in Manteca, said this is in part a result of the dramatic decline in precipitation this past winter. Rain and snow fell in November and December, but January through May was the driest period on record in the Sierra Nevada, whose snowpack is a crucial source of water for much of California.

Rules requiring more water to be released down the Stanislaus River to protect fish have also played a part in the decline of New Melones, Shields said.

"We'll get through the year, and everyone will do as well as they possibly can," he said. "But next year's going to be really something, if it's dry."

Scot Moody, general manager at the Stockton East Water District, said Thursday that even if next winter is normal, the district has been warned it will not get any water from New Melones. This would probably compel Stockton East to postpone efforts to use river water to recharge the region's sagging groundwater, an important goal in the long run.

The good news is that New Melones is not the city of Stockton's only source. The city also draws from New Hogan Lake, the Mokelumne River and the Delta. So, no unusual water-use restrictions are foreseen for citizens.

"At this point we're not panicking," Moody said. "But we are concerned."

Recreation at New Melones is not in danger, said Melanie Lewis, owner at Glory Hole Sports store near the lake. She said she has received many calls from people worried about the lake's water level, which dropped 11 feet in the past month.

Lewis said the lake would have to drop another 200 feet to make the water inaccessible from all boat ramps. That won't happen, at least not this year.

"It may not be pretty, but, after all, it's a reservoir, not a lake," Lewis said.

Battling salt

Less water in New Melones can, however, harm water quality for farmers in the south Delta.

Mary Hildebrand, a longtime farmer along the San Joaquin River south of Manteca, said farmers are "squeaking by."

"But it's made us realize we're very much at risk," she said.

The river is now too low to reach some farmers' intakes, she said. The only alternative - groundwater - has become too salty to rely upon.

In Hildebrand's area, the salt problem isn't just a short-term phenomenon. The large state and federal export pumps near Tracy draw in tons of salt. After that water irrigates lands south of Hildebrand's area, salty discharge drains into the San Joaquin River, which carries it back to the Delta.

The salt is then sucked back toward the export pumps and sent south again - forming a kind of salinity "merry-go-round," as Hildebrand puts it.

This year, she said, "there's just not enough freshwater flow coming in from the eastside tributaries to dilute it enough."

Other portions of the Delta are expected to get saltier this summer as well, because of the government's decision to hold back more water in Shasta to protect winter-run chinook.

Craig Wilson, the state's appointed "watermaster" to oversee water rights issues in the Delta, agreed with water and fish agencies to essentially overlook more rigorous Delta water quality standards. He said it was a "tough call."

"When there's not enough water to satisfy everyone, you're trying to do the best you can to satisfy as many of the needs as you can," Wilson said, adding that he believed the decision would make portions of the Delta "a little saltier" but wouldn't have a dramatic impact on farming operations.

Wilson said he's working with south Delta interests on a solution to the longer-term salinity problems there. Standards are routinely violated, and Delta advocates complain that no one has been held accountable.

While it's true water exports from the Delta have increased in recent weeks - on Wednesday the state and federal projects exported more than 17,500 acre-feet of water, or a dozen families'

yearly water needs each minute - Wilson said officials were complying with other standards, such as a requirement that a certain amount of water be allowed to exit the Delta naturally without being diverted.

Down south

Those who rely on exported water clearly face their own challenges. San Luis Reservoir, a key south-of-the-Delta storage point, was 17 percent of capacity on Thursday. Jason Peltier, deputy general manager of the Westlands Water District, said at a meeting of the Delta Stewardship Council that regulations to protect fish have contributed to water shortages in all but three of the past 20 years.

The latest battle for his district is actually happening far to the north, on the Klamath River, where a large salmon run expected this fall may be jeopardized by drought-related warm temperatures and low flows.

A plan to release cooler water down the Klamath's biggest tributary, the Trinity River, to provide relief for the fish could harm Westlands because that district relies in part on diversions from the Trinity into the Central Valley, Peltier said.

"While we are certainly supportive of pursuing protective measures for the fish, we have science questions whether disease problems can be resolved with this water," he said.

Environmentalists, concerned about both the Klamath situation and the winter-run salmon on the Sacramento, issued a news release Thursday warning of a coming "salmon apocalypse" and questioning the continued export of water from the Delta.

Bill Jennings of Stockton, head of the California Sportfishing Protection Alliance, said all of these conflicts - from the reservoirs, to the rivers, to the Delta - are yet another sign that water in this growing state is simply oversubscribed.

The state warned earlier this month that even senior riparian water rights could be restricted.

"We're in only the second dry year, we've not even declared a drought, and the system is fundamentally broken," he said.

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