



State Water Project Operations Update

Background

One year ago, the Department of Water Resources (DWR) and the Bureau of Reclamation reached agreement on updating how the State Water Project (SWP) and Central Valley Water Project (CVP) are operated to meet environmental regulations.

“The state and federal projects are intertwined, and we have a joint interest and responsibility to ensure our water system meets California’s needs especially as conditions change,” said DWR Director Karla Nemeth.

[The Coordinated Operation Agreement \(COA\)](#) was originally signed in 1986 and defines how the state and federal water projects share water quality and environmental flow obligations imposed by regulatory agencies. The agreement calls for periodic review to determine whether updates are needed in light of changed conditions. After completing a joint review process, DWR and Reclamation agreed to [an addendum to the COA](#) to reflect water quality regulations, biological opinions and hydrology updated since the agreement was signed.

In November 2019, DWR began environmental review of the long-term operations of the State Water Project (SWP). The action enables California’s water project operations to avoid relying on proposed federal biological opinions announced in October to achieve environmental approval to operate consistent with state law. Instead, DWR will seek approval from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) to operate the SWP in a way that improves protections for fish and complies with the California Endangered Species Act (CESA).

DWR issued a draft Environmental Impact Report (EIR) prepared under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) that identifies potential operational changes to protect species and manage the SWP based on real-time conditions in the Delta ecosystem, including additional flows dedicated to the environment.

Concurrent with the environmental review under CEQA, DWR is developing an application for a permit from CDFW for long-term SWP operations under CESA. CDFW will determine requirements for the permit in the coming months, with a specific focus on mitigating impacts of SWP operations on longfin smelt, Delta smelt, winter-run and spring-run Chinook salmon.

The draft EIR assesses impacts of proposed project operations, a “no project” alternative that reflects current operating rules, three alternatives that provide fresh water flows in the spring

and summer, and an alternative that uses physical barriers and other deterrents to keep fish away from the SWP pumps.

Historically, DWR had relied on federal Biological Opinions to cover the SWP under the federal ESA, with a consistency determination provided by CDFW. Securing a separate permit under CESA provides flexibility for CDFW to consider amendments to the permit based on better scientific understanding as part of the adaptive management program, without relying on changes to be made to the federal Biological Opinions. It also provides CESA authorization for SWP regardless of any potential changes in federal law.

In April 2019, the Yuba Water Agency, DWR, and University of California San Diego's Scripps Institution of Oceanography announced a joint research project to improve storm and runoff forecasting, and significantly reduce flood risk through enhanced operations of New Bullards Bar and Oroville dams. This research will supply information needed for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to update the 1970's-era water control manuals, which dictate the storm-season operations of both reservoirs. Yuba Water's goal is to have a new water control manual approved about the same time the agency completes construction of a new, planned secondary spillway at its New Bullards Bar Dam, estimated for completion in 2024.

Implementing forecast-informed reservoir operations reduces flood risk and improves public safety by using weather forecasts to determine the optimal releases for a dam in advance of threatening storms. Currently, dam operators are required to keep the reservoir at a significantly reduced water level during storm seasons, ensuring enough space to handle possible storms, regardless of the forecast, even during drought.

John Leahigh, DWR's Water Operations Executive Manager, will update the Commission on the joint operations of the SWP and federal water project, the draft EIR, and the status of efforts to move toward forecast-informed reservoir operations.

This is an informational item.

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