

U.S., state unite with plan to save Bay

It ensures fresh water for endangered fish, may end war among farmers, cities and environmentalists

By Jane Kay
EPA'S ENVIRONMENTAL WATER

Declaring that "peace has broken out" in California's long-running water wars, Gov. Wilson and federal officials announced a groundbreaking agreement Thursday that ensures a long-term water supply to revive threatened fish and wildlife in the San Francisco Bay and the Delta.

The historic agreement — if it doesn't unravel in the coming months — would finally resolve decades of court battles among farmers, urban water users and environmentalists over the use of the state's precious water supply.

U.S. Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt and EPA Administrator Carol Browner joined the governor at a news conference in Sacramento to unveil the plan, which promises enough fresh water from the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers to protect drinking water and habitat for wild salmon and dozens of other species from salty ocean water.

Since many water users throughout the state will give up some water under the plan, it's too soon to know the financial impact on urban or rural customers, ex-

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erts say.

"I believe that we have reached a consensus that is important for families, farmers and fish," Browner said.

"The agreement ... forged today represents an historic level of cooperation among interests that too often have been at odds," Wilson said. "It is a major victory for consensus over confrontation, a cease-fire in the water wars that for too long have plagued California."

Babbitt called the long-running dispute over control of the state's water "the ultimate resource issue."

The Environmental Protection Agency issued the water standards Thursday — the court-ordered deadline for some sort of Bay and Delta protections — but agreed to withdraw them in the coming months after the state approves its own plan, which the EPA must first endorse, Browner said.

Until then, the federal standard announced Thursday and the Endangered Species Act will be used

to protect the estuary by ensuring fresh water flows for the endangered Delta smelt and Sacramento winter run of the chinook salmon, Browner said.

Balances, limits, fresh water

The plan includes:

► An overall assurance of river flows that would maintain a healthy balance of salt and fresh water. In average rainfall years, 450,000 acre feet of the 6 million acre feet now being exported for farms and cities could be redirected to the Bay and Delta. In drought years, it could mean an additional 1.1 million acre feet.

► A limit on how much water can be exported from the Delta throughout the year. The state draft standards proposed that as much as 35 percent of diversions could be used for fish and wildlife in the critical spring months.

► A plan to ensure enough fresh water in the lower Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers for survival of migrating salmon.

► A standard for salinity in Suisun Marsh to keep the wetlands from becoming too brackish to maintain the vast numbers of wildlife and fish species.

► A fresh water standard for Suisun Bay to protect the endangered Delta smelt and other species from declining in numbers.

'Potential for a fight'

For the plan to work, the powerful water interests that divert water from the Delta, such as Westlands Water District, Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, and East Bay Municipal Utility District, must agree to limits the state will issue following hearings in June.

"There is a potential for a fight," said Stuart Somack, an attorney for the Northern California Water Association, which represents growers. "But what you've got to factor in is the real hurt we've suffered from losing water. The growers want certainty. I see an optimism for agreement based on the reality of the situation."

Normally, the state Water Quality Resources Board would pass the standards. But the Wilson administration blocked the board's rule-making last year to the point that the federal government, spurred by a lawsuit filed by environmental groups, developed its own standards. The EPA had to

issue the rules Thursday to meet a U.S. District Court-signed settlement of the lawsuit.

The extent of damage to the Bay

The health of the Bay has been damaged by chemical and sewage discharges, filling wetlands and dredging.

But the most serious harm has come from decades of diverting more than half of the natural rain and snow-melt flows to supply farms and cities.

At immediate risk are runs of wild salmon, striped bass, Delta smelt, starry flounder, longfin smelt and Sacramento splittail.

For decades, the amount of water allowed to flow into the Bay has been highly controversial, and forms the core of California's water wars.

Generally, agriculture and urban users have argued that they should receive priority for the supplies instead of fish and wildlife.

But in recent years, more commercial and sports fishing interests, industries, conservationists and scientists have become outspoken advocates for saving the San Francisco Bay and the Delta.