

Feds ready decision to cut Southland water supply

Supply from Bay Delta rests on move to save fish species

BY LIZ MULLEN

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Federal officials are scheduled to unveil a plan next week that would cut the amount of fresh water the state is taking from the environmentally ailing Northern California Bay Delta and sending south.

Because the Delta — which collects 47 percent of all the rain that falls in the state — is a major supply of drinking water for California, water will be more expensive and scarcer in Los Angeles and throughout the state for years to come after the cutbacks are imposed, according to state and federal officials.

Implementing the new standards will involve reducing the amount of fresh water state and federal water projects take from the delta. About 6 million to 7 million acre-feet of water is diverted from the delta to urban and agricultural water users each

Ray Remy, president of the Greater Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, said the Bay Delta issue is of great importance to business because it may affect "the cost of doing business and the cost of living" in

The diversion change is designed to increase the fresh water in the delta in order to reverse the decline in the populations of endangered fish species, the Chinook Salmon and the Delta Smelt. Those species have been dying as a result of salt water from the Pacific Ocean creeping farther into the delta.

The delta supplies about 1 million of the 4 million acre-feet of water consumed by Southern California residents and businesses, according to the Metropolitan Water District. A typical family of five uses an acre-foot of water a year.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have signed court settlements which require that the agencies issue water amount and salinity standards for the delta on Dec. 15. Those water volume and salinity standards will involve a cutting back the amount of fresh water that the state and federal water projects take out of the delta.

Also later this month, state water officials are expected to announce their own water standard for the region. State and federal officials are hoping they can reach an agreement on a single water cutback from the state and federal water projects.

If the state and federal governments issue different standards, a battle may ensue over which government has authority to regulate water rights, state and federal sources told the Business Journal.

Elizabeth Rieke, assistant secretary of the U.S. Department of the Interior, who is coordinating the federal plan for the delta, said the federal government has the authority to enforce the standard it sets. But other water issue experts told the Business Journal that whether or not federal officials have that authority is unclear under current law.

Rieke said there is "no question" the decision would impact water prices and availability in the Southland. But, she added, "the impact on Southern California depends a great deal on whether or not ... you have a wet rain year."

California business leaders have long awaited a decision on how much water the Bay Delta will be allowed to maintain and how much water users will get. In a letter to President Bill Clinton and Gov. Pete Wilson last summer, top officers of the state's major corporations urged that a standard be set "to protect both our environment and economy."

"The lack of approved standards is creating uncertainty that threatens the economic recovery we so desperately need," stated the letter which was signed by seven heads of corporations, including John Bryson, chairman of Rosemead-based Southern California Edison Co. and Richard Rosenberg, chairman of San Francisco-based BankAmerica Corp.

Rieke told the Business Journal last week that standards will be set and the delta may begin as early as February, 1995 to keep water which was formerly sent to Southern California.

Federal officials last week were still working on devising the standard, Rieke said.

"The federal law tells us to protect the (fish) species," she said. "We want to protect the species in a way that uses the least amount of water. But it must be a scientifically supportable deal."

Last week, state and federal officials, as well as representatives of the state's business and environmental communities, were trying to negotiate a compromise.

Rieke said federal officials are still evaluating three proposals which would provide three different cutbacks to water users which

take water from the delta.

One proposal, put forward by the EPA last year, would impose cutbacks to delta water users of 500,000 acre-feet in an average rainfall year and 1.5 million in a drought year, according to Patrick Wright, chief of the Bay Delta Section of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

A plan by environmental groups is similar to the EPA's, but would cut back the amount of water urban and agricultural users could take from the delta by 2 million acre-feet in a drought situation.

A third plan was recently proposed by the Metropolitan Water District, the water wholesale agency for L.A., Orange, Ventura and San Bernardino counties, and several other water agencies around the state.

That plan would impose the smallest reduction in the amount of water from water users take from the delta — 300,000 acre feet in an average rainfall year and a maximum of 1 million feet in a drought year.

John Amodio, executive director of the Bay Delta Oversight Council, which was set up by Gov. Wilson two years ago to find a solution to the Bay Delta problem, said the state favors the water agencies' plan.

"I think there is a distinct possibility that a proposal remarkably similar to the water users' proposal, with some limited refinements, could be acceptable to all parties," Amodio said.

Rieke said federal officials are trying to find a compromise, but it is not going to be easy to issue a standard that will please environmentalists, the business community and water agencies.

"If we lowball it, there will be a suit from the environmental community," Rieke said. "If we take more water than is needed, we are going to be sued by the water users. That's the tightrope we have to walk."

Remy, who is also a member of Gov. Wilson's Bay Delta Oversight Council, said there are a lot of productive negotiations going on between state and federal officials.

"Where things may begin to fall apart is what the feds may want may not be acceptable at the state level," Remy said.

"If we wind up with a federal standard that is unacceptable to the state, we are going to be back in a loggerhead between federal policy and state's rights."