Delta Water Pumping Called Threat to Salmon

By Glen Martin
Chronicle Staff Writer

Environmentalists and fisheries advocates are blasting a Clinton administration plan to pump water from the Sacramento River Delta to a huge Central Valley irrigation district, claiming it threatens a rare run of chinook salmon and abrogates a historic agreement to protect the Delta's ecology.

The plan — which was approved yesterday by the California Water Resources Control Board — calls for pumping up to 130,000 extra acre feet of water in November and December to the Westlands Water District, a 600,000-acre agricultural region in Fresno and Kings counties that normally receives about 1 million acre feet of water from the Delta under state and federal contracts.

Stephen Ottemoeller, director of resources for the Westlands Water District, said the pumping is payback for reduced pumping in the spring aimed at preserving the beleaguered San Joaquin fall-run salmon.

But environmentalists dislike the policy because it would occur during the peak of the downriver migration of young Sacramento River spring-run chinook salmon, a candidate for the state and federal endangered species lists.

Fish mortality can be extremely high in the Delta when the huge federal and state water project pumps are running.

"We're shocked and outraged, but we're not totally surprised," said David Behar, executive director of the Bay Institute, a Sausalito-based lobby group devoted to preservation of the Delta and San Francisco Bay.

"This really threatens a fishery that is already in serious trouble," said Behar, who claims that it violates the spirit of the Bay-Delta, an agreement between government regulators, environmentalists and farmers concluded in December 1994.

Behar said a fisheries advocacy coalition will send a letter to the state Water Resources Control Board on Monday protesting the decision to allow extra pumping unless spring run protections are strengthened.

But U.S. Deputy Secretary of Interior John Garamendi said the pumping shouldn't have a negative impact on the spring run chinooks.

"We are confident that this fall pumping will not adversely impact the biological resources in the delta," said Garamendi. "This entire operation is a culmination of (a state and federal) work group that focused on establishing protective conditions during the pumping."

10-12-96 SENATOR BOXER: WOULD YOU PLEASE ASK JOHN GARAMENDI TO WRITE ME AND TELL ME WHY INSTALLATION OF FISH SCREENS WERE NOT CONSIDERED "... ON ESTABLISHING PROTECTIVE CONDITIONS DURING THE PUMPING"?
COULD YOU PLEASE TELL JOHN THAT IF THE PUMPS HAD FISH SCREENS, THEY COULD PUMP WATER ANYTIME THEY WANT.

THANKS

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