

PRESS RELEASE

Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations, Water4Fish

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Agribusiness Giant Westlands Moves to Kill Salmon Seeks legal permission to double death rate of migrating baby salmon in Delta

Fresno, CA - Westlands Water District has asked a federal judge in Fresno to issue a temporary restraining order to block a federal salmon restoration plan that protects salmon and other fish in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. Westland's move could put the survival of California and Oregon's multi-billion dollar commercial and recreational salmon fishing industry on the line.

The group is requesting a court to order lifting restrictions on the operation of huge delta water pumps and canals from February through May. Pumping water from the delta south is restricted at this time to protect baby salmon that migrate from the Sacramento River to the ocean during this period. The pumps move massive volumes of fresh water from the Delta to farms and cities to the south. Past pumping during the spring salmon migration is known to have killed large numbers of salmon. The request is expected to be heard in U.S. District Court tomorrow.

The restrictions in question were put in place in 2009 as part of a federal salmon restoration plan, known as a Biological Opinion. Recent studies indicate that the salmon restoration plan may increase the baby salmon survival by at least fifty percent. The salmon restoration plan protects threatened species of salmon and other native fish. It also helps improve the survival of non-threatened, commercially valuable fall-run chinook salmon. Sacramento River fall-run chinook, commonly known as king salmon, form the backbone of Oregon and California's salmon fishing industry.

"Fishing families along one thousand miles of U.S. coastline rely on healthy runs of Sacramento River salmon to make a living; they depend on keeping the current salmon protection plan in place," said Zeke Grader, executive director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations. "Too much water is being taken from the San Francisco Bay/Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta estuary - salmon, fishing families, coastal communities and seafood consumers have paid a heavy price as a result."

In a typical year, the Sacramento's fall-run chinook represent ninety percent of the salmon caught off California, and sixty percent of the salmon caught off Oregon. The recent catastrophic collapse of the Sacramento's once mighty salmon runs, driven in large part by poor water management in the Delta, has

led to two years of closed fishing in two states, hundreds of millions in lost income, and tens of thousands of lost jobs.

“The shutdown of the California recreational and commercial salmon fishing industry for the last two years has already erased \$2.8 billion dollars and 23,000 jobs from our state’s economy,” said Dick Pool, program manager of Water4Fish. “The 2009 adult salmon returns to the Sacramento are almost assured to reach another all-time record low. The past water export practices have been the root cause of this decline. This federal fish restoration plan is the absolute minimum we need to begin a turn around of this decline.”

Salmon, and the fishing families that depend on them, will have even more to lose if Westlands gets its way. According to the National Marine Fishery Service, when the Delta pumps are on, baby salmon are diverted from their natural route in the mainstem Sacramento River into the central and southern Delta waterways, where they suffer mortality rates of sixty five percent. The diverted salmon also fall victim to the Delta pumps. Only one baby salmon in six survives an encounter with state pumping facilities, while only one in three survives after being drawn into federal pumps.

The federal fish restoration plans for the Delta have been strongly opposed by Westlands and other western San Joaquin Valley agribusiness, as well southern California land speculators. Western San Joaquin growers and their Congressional representatives have overlooked or belittled clear evidence that Delta water withdrawals have exceeded the ecological carrying capacity of the Delta. Those favoring more water exports have further refused to acknowledge the economic damage done to Oregon and California’s multi-billion dollar sport and commercial salmon fishery caused by the excessive water withdrawals from the Delta.

The Delta is the single most important estuary on the West Coast of the Americas and provides habitat and a migratory pathway between Sierra Nevada streams and the Golden Gate for the West Coast’s second largest salmon run. Biologists have grown alarmed in recent years about the cascading series of crashing Delta fish populations; not only salmon and steelhead, but Delta smelt, striped bass, longfin smelt, sturgeon and Sacramento splittail are all in trouble. In November of 2007, the California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) fall survey of native delta fish found that five out of the six fish surveyed had declined to all time record low numbers. These surveys make it clear that there are biological limits to the amount of water that can be exported south.