



NEWS RELEASE

San Luis & Delta Mendota Water Authority

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Release Immediate

Date: Aug. 31, 2007

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FARMERS LOSE WATER TO FISH

San Joaquin Valley farmers receiving water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta will see their 2008 supplies cut by as much as 50 percent or a reduction in deliveries by as much as 500,000 acre-feet, one of the largest single court-ordered reductions in California water history. Federal District Court Judge Oliver Wanger in Fresno announced the decision today after several days of testimony to determine how best to operate the pumps supplying the water and at the same time protect the delta smelt, a 2-4 inch long fish with a dwindling population.

“We knew the judge was going to take away some of our water but we were holding out hope that he would have given more time to the scientists to continue working toward a science-based solution,” said Dan Nelson, executive director of the San Luis & Delta Mendota Water

Authority. The authority is a group of 32 water districts that supplies water to farmers covering more than 2 million acres.

“Every farmer in the 3 million acres receiving water through the Delta pumps and 25 million residents in the Bay and Los Angeles are at immediate risk resulting from less water flowing to their farms, homes and businesses next year,” Nelson added.

“Even though the judge’s ruling applies only to next year, it is still devastating news for our farmers,” Nelson said. “Thousands of acres of orchard and vine crops that represent a long-term investment by farmers are in jeopardy. What happens if a farmer is not able to secure a water source to irrigate his crops? It is possible that these crops could dry up and die.”

Annual water requirements for permanent crops, including almonds, grapes, pistachios and others in the CVP south of Delta farming region total 500,000 acre-feet or more. The court-mandated reduction in CVP deliveries to farmers means less water for other crops such as lettuce, tomatoes and many other fruit and vegetable crops. Those crops could potentially be fallowed to meet the water needs of permanent crops. A similar scenario would be felt in the entire south of delta CVP service area.

Nelson explained that the effects of taking water away from the farmers will also be felt in the rural communities throughout the San Joaquin Valley west side.

“Unemployment will go up if farming is cut back because of a lack of water,” he said.

A U.S. Census Bureau study released this week listed Fresno, Tulare, Kings, Kern, Merced and Madera counties with the highest percentage of residents living below the poverty line in California last year of all state counties.

“It’s ironic and tragic that on the heels of this study that these water cutbacks are taking place,” insisted Nelson. “These rural communities rely on their local farms for their financial survival. Any cut in the irrigation supply to these farms will continue to damage these communities and they simply can’t afford it.”

The hearing began last week in response to an earlier court ruling that the operation of the pumps do not comply with the federal Environmental Species Act and threatens the existence of the delta smelt. A group of environmental organizations filed the earlier suit and ask for a reduction in 2008 deliveries to as low as zero percent. Other plans submitted by State and federal agencies that oversee the pumping operations had suggested deliveries from 5 to 55 percent of contracts.

“In the end, California’s rural communities lose, farmers lose and the delta smelt loses because science pointing to the real problems affecting the smelt populations is being ignored,” claimed B.J. Miller, a consulting engineer who has studied the Delta for years.

“The judge’s decision is disappointing because scientists are telling us that the pumps only account for 5-15 percent of the causes that are affecting the smelt population,” Nelson added. “Other factors representing a greater effect on the smelt numbers are loss of food supplies and the introduction of foreign plant and fish species that have dramatically altered the environment.”

Over 3 million acres of farmland served by the federal Central Valley Project and State Water Project is affected by the decision. Large portions of the nation’s fruits and vegetables are grown and harvested from that acreage.

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