

‘Time for action is now.’ Interior chief demands plan to pump more California water south

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The Trump administration is accelerating efforts to pump more of Northern California’s water to farmers in the San Joaquin Valley, setting up a bruising conflict with state officials and environmentalists.

As farmers and others prepared for a water rally Monday on the steps of the Capitol in Sacramento, Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke sent a memo to underlings demanding a plan within 15 days aimed at “maximizing water supply deliveries” to irrigation districts south of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

“The time for action is now,” he wrote.

Zinke also blasted a proposal by the State Water Resources Control Board [that would restrict water deliveries to Valley farms and cities, as well as much of the Bay Area, in order to prop up endangered fish populations.](#) The state board is starting two days of hearings on the plan Tuesday, although it has postponed a decision indefinitely to encourage environmentalists and farm groups to reach compromises. The rally at the Capitol, which promoters say will bring hundreds of farmers to the north steps, is a protest against the state’s plan.

“The State of California is now proposing additional unacceptable restrictions that further reduce the Department’s ability to deliver water to Federal contractors,” Zinke wrote in his memo, which was dated Aug. 17.

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation already has threatened to sue the state if the water board finalizes its plan. Zinke’s memo said the Trump administration would take a broader array of “legislative and litigation measures” in order to deliver more water south.



Farmers and others rallied Monday on the steps of the Capitol in Sacramento in protest against the state’s water delivery plan. By Paul Kitagaki Jr.

The memo suggests the Trump administration is growing increasingly frustrated with the regulatory bottlenecks that prevent more water from being pumped out of the Delta to millions of acres of Valley farmland.

Last December the Interior Department's Bureau of Reclamation said it was [exploring methods of moving more water south](#), but it promised that the evaluation would take a year or longer. Now Zinke is looking at having an action plan ready quickly.

“This is just an escalation of the Trump administration's war on California,” said attorney Doug Obegi, of the Natural Resources Defense Council in San Francisco, which opposes measures to increase water pumping. “We'll see what happens. ... So far the state has been pretty effective at pushing back on the administration.”

[While campaigning for president in Fresno](#) in 2016, Donald Trump belittled environmental regulations and said he would make water deliveries to agriculture a priority of his administration.

Zinke's chief deputy at the Interior Department is [David Bernhardt, a former lobbyist](#) for the Westlands Water District, which delivers water to a major swath of the Valley from the U.S. government's Central Valley Project. Bernhardt had vowed to recuse himself from decisions affecting Westlands, but the memo says Bernhardt's office will be in charging of making final recommendations to Zinke.

Interior officials say Bernhardt's recusal ended on Aug. 2.

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