



## Strange bedfellows? Westlands and San Francisco share common ground

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It's rare that Westlands Water District and San Francisco face identical problems, but plans to keep more water flowing in the San Joaquin and Sacramento rivers — leaving less for irrigators and cities — is bringing the two together.

Westlands, the largest agricultural water district in the United States, said if proposed plans are adopted by state water regulators, its farmers would have to fallow more land due to lack of reliable water supplies, putting people out of work, harming the economy and hurting the quality of life of communities and residents whose lives are tied to westside agriculture.

Meanwhile, San Francisco residents, who get their water from the Tuolumne River, would face drastic cutbacks in drought years, the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission said.

It remains to be seen if Westlands and San Francisco's water entity would ever work together on the issue.

The utilities commission said it's urging the state to work with it and "other stakeholders on voluntary negotiated settlements" on river water priorities, while Westlands said it's not ready to say what it will do next.

But both are complaining about the State Water Resources Control Board's proposed water allocation plans.

The drama started in July when the State Water Resources Control Board [issued a new water plan](#) for the lower San Joaquin River recommending that 30 to 50 percent of the water — 40 percent is the target — would stay in the river as "unimpaired flows."

The goal is to rescue salmon populations and save the delta smelt.



The California Aqueduct brings water from the San Joaquin Delta to Westlands Water District. This photo was taken in 2014 along Avenal Cutoff Road just east of Interstate 5. DANIEL CESAREZ Vida en el Valle/The Fresno Bee

For both rural irrigators and urban entities, the plan, if adopted, would mean 7 to 23 percent less water being diverted for their use, according to state figures.

Upset [farmers rallied](#) in Sacramento, saying it would hurt agricultural production and would not be effective in restoring salmon populations.

The State Water Resources Control Board was to vote on adopting the plan last month, but after criticism by legislators, put off action until December.

But it was a similar proposal for the Sacramento River sent a shock wave through Westlands.

The water board also announced a "framework" for the Sacramento River and its tributaries. The plan calls for 35 to 75 percent unimpaired flows, with 55 percent as the target, Westlands said.

Westlands gets water from the Sacramento River, via the San Joaquin Delta and the California Aqueduct. If the framework is adopted, Westlands would face up to a 26 percent loss of water supply, the district said.

It's now taking its case to the media and the public.

Westlands serves 700 farms growing permanent and annual crops on about 600,000 acres.



Irrigated fields in the Westlands Water District border Interstate 5 west of Tranquillity in June 2015. DAMON WINTER The New York Times

Dan Errotabere's family has farmed near Riverdale since the 1920s. He and his two brothers farm 5,500 acres of almonds, pistachios, tomatoes, garlic, pima cotton, wheat, safflower, onions, seed lettuce, garbanzo beans and wine grapes.

He sits on the Westlands board of directors. If the water board's proposal for the Sacramento River goes into effect, "we're not going to be able to irrigate," he said.

Westlands' water supply from the Central Valley Project has been cut in half since 1990, according to district figures. It blames "ineffective regulatory policies" aimed at fisheries restoration.

If there's another big cut, westside agriculture would become so uncertain that "it will be all but unsustainable," he said.

It's probably a good thing that San Francisco would also be affected so residents can see "now it's in my back yard," he said.

Harris Farms, another big west side operation, grows carrots, garlic, watermelon, spinach, lettuce, almonds, pistachios and other crops.

It's frustrating to be forced to take another water supply reduction because "we grow safe, nutritious food that feeds the nation," said William Bourdeau, executive vice president of Harris Farms and member of the Westlands board of directors.

The more water that is kept in the river, the more that flows out to the ocean, he said: "I don't think it helps the environment."

Bourdeau said one piece of [welcome news is the recent announcement by Department of Interior](#) Secretary Ryan Zinke that the Bureau of Reclamation will seek to increase "south of Delta" water deliveries.

Surely Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Tulare, is the source of the Zinke announcement, said Johnny Amaral, Westlands deputy general manager for external affairs and formerly Nunes' chief of staff.

"This has Devin's handprints all over it," Amaral said.

Nunes was a key adviser to the Trump campaign on California farm water issues, and Trump wowed supporters at a campaign stop in Fresno by vowing to get more water to farmers.

The solution to the salmon and delta smelt issue is not more water in rivers but rather infrastructure projects that help fish survive, **increasing water flow by raising Shasta Dam, building Sites Reservoir in the Sacramento River watershed**, and managing "functional flows" based on science and data, Amaral said.

"Why are we not being smarter about this?" Amaral said. "There's plenty of water in this state if it's managed properly."

Amaral said the State Water Resources Control Board is wrong in arguing that more water in rivers will restore fish numbers.

"This is a flow only approach," Amaral said. "If fish aren't rebounding, 'send more water, send more water'...There are lots of issues that affect the abundance of species in the

Delta. A flow only approach doesn't mean you are restoring habitat. If we truly want to see the fish rebound, we have to look at everything."

Politically, it could help Westlands if San Francisco and urban areas are feeling the same pain, he said.

"There's a group of three or four San Francisco legislators...(who) have weighed into the state board saying you can't do this," Amaral said. "So the politics of this become very, very different. When it stops becoming a bunch of farmers on the west side complaining about not having water to soccer moms in Marin County and Santa Clara ... It becomes a whole different ball game."

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