

Q&A: Here's what we know about Trump's water memo and California

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President Donald Trump's memorandum on western water, which ordered federal agencies to look for ways to remove regulatory burdens on federal water projects, has caused waves in California.

But what will it actually do? That's not clear, even to federal bureaucrats. And is farm country in California really the desolate wasteland described by Congressional Republicans?

The USA TODAY Network in California asked experts on California water, farming and environmental issues to break down what's known at this point. Here's what we know now:



Efforts to protect chinook salmon have a significant effect on how water is distributed in California. (Photo: Damon Arthur/Record Searchlight)

Q. Who wins? Which projects are likely to get a boost from the president's memo?

A. Three main water projects are under development in California: Raising the height of Shasta Dam and building the Sites and Temperance Flat reservoirs.

The \$5 billion Sites Reservoir project in Colusa County is still many years away, but is moving through the planning and environmental review process. The California Water Commission this year granted \$816 million of Proposition 1 funding toward the project, but more money still needs to be raised.

Plans to raise Shasta Dam 18-1/2 feet are much closer to becoming reality. The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation plans to award the first construction contracts in December 2019. But the agency needs to find local and state partners to help pay the estimated \$1.4 billion cost.

Dam projects in the San Joaquin Valley face steeper hurdles.

[Raising Shasta Dam: Nearby property owners want answers](#)

The \$3 billion Temperance Flat proposal entails a 602-foot-high dam just behind Millerton Lake. It would be the first new dam in California since New Melones in the 1960s, when JFK was president, and the second highest in the state.

Earlier this year, the dam only received \$171 million from Proposition 1 funds, according to Steve Worthley, acting chairman of the San Joaquin Valley Water Authority.

Closer to the ground, the Friant-Kern Canal is a major irrigation artery that snakes 152 miles from Fresno to Bakersfield. It delivers water to 18,000 land-owners and 1.3 million acres of land.

But the canal is sinking. During the drought, heavy use of ground water made the surface slump. And that has reduced the canal's ability to convey water by as much as two-thirds, especially in wetter years, said Friant-Kern Authority spokeswoman Alexandria Biering.

Canal repairs could cost up to \$500 million and are set to begin sometime next year.

Q. How might the president's order help the projects?

A. Federal officials said this week they were still looking into that.

Heather Swift, a senior advisor to the secretary of the interior, said the agency expects changes to the timelines for water projects in California. But she could not provide further detail about which projects would be affected.

[Work begins on raising the height of Shasta Dam](#)

"We are still in the process of assessing those changes and don't have anything to announce at the moment," Swift said.

While environmental studies on Shasta Dam are complete, a similar review for Sites Reservoir still needs to be performed.



Sites Reservoir, if it is built would be located west of the Sacramento River in Colusa County.
(Photo: U.S. Bureau of Reclamation)

The Friant-Kern Canal repairs are “shovel-ready,” so the president’s memo is unlikely to impact the project. But it could help groundwater recharge by eventually providing more surface water to the Valley, Biering says.

Temperance Flat Dam’s biggest problem is funding rather than regulation, so Trump’s memo is unlikely to help there either, according to Worthley.

Q. What about the Delta and all the regulations that affect water use? How much executive power does the president have to rewrite biological opinions and order fast-tracking that might run afoul of federal environmental law?

A. So-called biological opinions determine which animals qualify for protection under the Endangered Species Act. Those opinions, in turn, determine the ways the Central Valley Project and other water agencies can operate.

The Sierra Club and other environmental groups across the nation have pledged to challenge the administration if it moves ahead with changes to biological opinions regarding the Delta smelt and chinook salmon.

To protect those species, regulators impose restrictions on when and how much water can be pumped out of the Delta. Trump, ag interests and others have heavily criticized the practice of letting so much of the water from Delta tributaries flow naturally out to the ocean.

Legal constraints will limit the memo’s effectiveness, according to Dr. Thomas Holyoke, a Fresno State political science professor.

“The memo is mostly a political move,” he said. “Water is a critical issue in the Valley, and this will help Denham, Nunes, Valadao and other Republican congressmen facing tight races in the Central Valley.”

[Sites Reservoir likely years down the road](#)

Andrew Janz may be running as a Democrat against Devin Nunes, R-Tulare, but he quickly moved to sidestep the memo as a campaign issue, declaring his support.

“I’m excited to see the President taking our water issues here in the Valley seriously. I support today’s executive order,” Janz said.

Politics aside, Holyoke and others are skeptical the memo can make good on Trump’s campaign promises to deliver water to the Valley and beyond.

“The memo may have some small effects years down the line by potentially expediting the environmental impact report process,” Holyoke said. “But biological opinions are ultimately settled in court, just as funding to get many water projects off the ground ultimately requires Congress approval.”

Q. What would happen if they pumped more water out of the Delta?

A. During the rainy season, given heavy water flows from tributaries such as the Sacramento, American and Feather rivers, there may not be much of an impact, said fisheries expert David Vogel of Red Bluff, who has studied the Delta and its fisheries for more than 50 years.

But when water flows are down, such as in the fall, increased pumping would hurt chinook salmon migrating out to sea by drawing them south toward the pumps before they get to the ocean. It would also hurt the Delta smelt, a tiny endangered fish that lives in the estuary.

Pumping too much water from the south Delta to the San Joaquin Valley and Southern California also could cause ocean water to intrude into the Delta, increasing salinity and harming water quality, Vogel said.

Q. What do fishing interests have to say about the president's memo?

A. "Under current conditions we often don't have enough water in the Sacramento Valley to keep our salmon healthy. We'd like to see Northern California water stay in Northern California to keep the salmon healthy," said John McManus, executive director of the Golden Gate Salmon Association. "Any calls for more diversions (from the Delta) would be bad for the salmon."

Q. I saw a message from my congressman saying this is needed because California's farm country has been reduced to a desolate wasteland. Is it really that bad?

A. Zip down Interstate 5 and you'll notice a recurring theme: Signs decrying the 'Congress-Created Dust Bowl' and 'Government-Created Water Crisis' looming over seemingly endless acres of crop fields left fallow.

A wet 2017 may have put an official end to California's historic five-year drought, but its effects are still felt in the Central Valley, where a lack of water cost "America's Breadbasket" an estimated \$3.3 billion in 2015 alone, according to a UC Davis study.

Still, Tulare and Kern counties have been breaking ag revenue records, collectively earning more than \$15 billion at the height of drought in 2015, according to ag commissioner reports.

More northern counties saw growth, as well. Sacramento Valley crops values increased over the past 10 years. Crop values in Tehama County grew 88 percent from 2005 to 2015, according to crop reports.

Crop values in Butte County rose 76 percent from 2005 to 2015, to \$773.5 million. Glenn County crop values rose 90 percent in that time period, to \$748.9 million.

he Tulare County Farm Bureau cautions that crop values are a poor barometer of farm profits, however.

“Crop reports don’t account for farmers’ input costs, which skyrocket with the price of water during drought conditions,” said Tricia Blattler, who runs the bureau’s Tulare County chapter. “As a result, many Valley farmers have barely eked by.”

According to Blattler, Valley farmers have had to dramatically reshift their growing priorities, turning to permanent crops like almonds and pistachios, which require a third of the water that traditional vegetable and row crops consume.

“Farmers have made great sacrifices over the past several years that some people may not realize,” Blattler said. “But Valley farmers are amazingly resilient.”

Q. Why are California's farmers so worried about drought? What gives this its political potency?

A. Small farm owners in the Central Valley have been disproportionately hit by both the drought and the environmental regulations Trump seeks to streamline.

Art Ramirez operates about 60 acres of orange and lemon trees in the foothills outside Visalia. In 2014 he spent more than \$100,000 to construct a well to pump the water that allowed his trees to survive.

At the time, water from the Friant-Kern canal, where the farmer usually sources his water, ran about \$1,200 an acre-foot. That's about 326,000 gallons.

Ramirez works a second job to supplement his farm.

“Without the additional income, there’s no way I could grow,” he said.

Ramirez says many of his foothill neighbors are small family farmers with roots stretching back to the 1800s. The struggle to keep up with constantly shifting regulations has put a great strain on their ability to operate.

That’s why he thinks Trump’s water memo could be “good for everybody.”

“I don’t care if he’s a Democratic, Republican or even a communist,” Ramirez said. “We need to come together to find a balance that better serves the water interests of farmers, citizens, fish and the environment.”

<https://www.redding.com/story/news/2018/10/23/president-trumps-water-memo-making-waves-across-california/1733744002/>