

Trump brings more water — and himself — to Central Valley farms

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BAKERSFIELD — President Trump swooped into California farm country Wednesday and, with a flourish, signed off on a plan that would take water away from fish and ship more to farmers in the Central Valley.



BAKERSFIELD, CA--Congressman Kevin McCarthy and President Donald Trump greet the crowd in an aircraft hangar near the Bakersfield airport on Wednesday, Feb 19, 2020.

A crowd of several hundred farmers cheered inside an airplane hangar at Meadows Field Airport, northwest of Bakersfield, as Trump finalized a federal plan, known as a biological opinion, that loosens restrictions on water deliveries to growers in the region.

The ceremonial signing of the controversial document, which federal officials say will boost water “flexibility,” came on the second day of a four-day sweep through California and the western United States.

The appearance had all the markings of a campaign rally, with Trump walking to the podium to the tune of Lee Greenwood's "Proud to Be an American" and chants of "USA, USA" by the many red-capped spectators.

Trump, flanked by House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, Interior Secretary David Bernhardt and U.S. Rep. Devin Nunes, said he promised more water for California farmers in 2018 and is now coming through after years of bad policy and "millions and millions of gallons being poured out into the Pacific Ocean."

"A major obstacle to providing more water for the region's farmers has now been eliminated by the federal government," he said. "We got it done, and we got it done fast."

The plan has been challenged by fishing and environmental groups, which accused the Trump administration of scrapping regulations proposed last July by the National Marine Fisheries Service to protect chinook salmon, steelhead trout and the endangered delta smelt. They say it benefits Trump's well-connected friends, siphoning 10 to 12% more water out of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.

Part of the fury generated by Wednesday's signing is the belief among opponents that the president has somehow managed to turn a science document into a political football. But farmers in water-starved Kern County were thankful the president was standing up for their water rights and livelihoods.



BUTTONWILLOW, CA--Farmer Tim Thompson farms a little over 1200 acres near Bakersfield. Tim has a difficult time getting water for his crops. Getting water for his crops is the main issue he wants to communicate to President Trump. Photo: Tomas Ovalle / Special to The Chronicle

“Water is a serious issue in Kern County, and what the president is doing certainly helps,” said Jason Selvidge, a partner in his family farm, Buttonwillow Land and Cattle Co., which is outside of Bakersfield. “Is this enough water to solve the problem? No. Will it save some farms from going fallow? Yes. I think it is a step in the right direction.”

Bakersfield is at the southern end of the San Joaquin Valley, whose farms produce much of the food that goes on tables across the United States. Politically, it is a conservative bastion in liberal California and home to Trump loyalist and House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, who joined the president Wednesday.



BUTTONWILLOW, CA--Sandy and Ryan Forbes wear their feelings about guns on their shirts as they attend President Trump's visit to Bakersfield on Wednesday, Feb 19, 2020. Photo: Tomas Ovalle / Special to The Chronicle

The stop was Trump's first visit to the region since he campaigned there in 2016 and vowed to fight to get more water for agriculture.

The flat, dry landscape is as water-starved as any place in California. Farmers in Kern County complain that they get only about half the water they have been promised by state and federal governments and that, as a result, too much groundwater is being pumped out of the aquifer.

“The sad thing is, if we were able to import what we are supposed to get, it would come very close to curing the situation we are in,” said Tim Thomson, who grows vegetable

crops on 800 acres of his farm in Buttonwillow. “Efficiency isn’t the problem. Ninety percent of what we grow is drip irrigation. In most of Kern County, there is very little more that can be conserved.”

The lack of water has forced farmers to use so much groundwater that farmland is sinking in many places, a situation that led to the 2014 passage of the state’s Sustainable Groundwater Management Act, which requires local and regional agencies to come up with a plan to eliminate the deficit within 20 years.

The president appears to hope that increasing irrigation deliveries to the state’s vast agricultural economy will help rally rural voters behind his re-election bid.

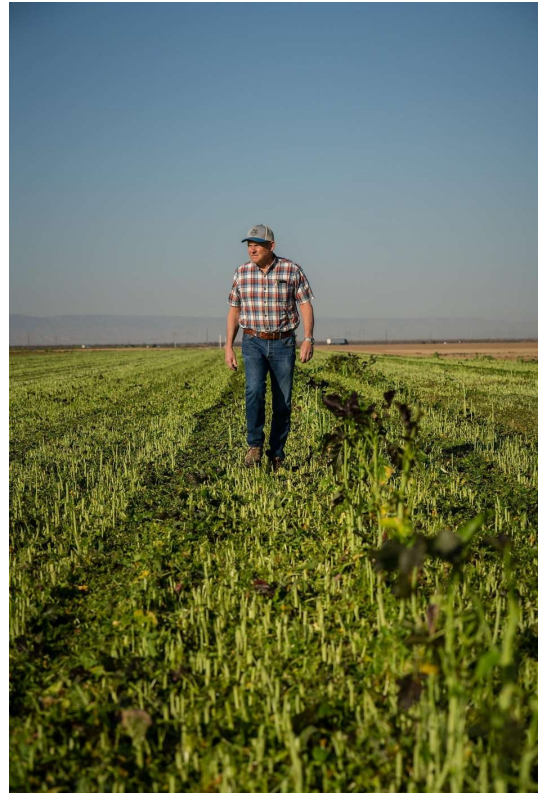
Water will undoubtedly continue to be the major issue in farm country and the president’s support won’t change that fact. But fishery advocates called the plan a “water grab” that will harm not only fish, but tens of thousands of Californians who work in the salmon industry.

John McManus, president of the Golden State Salmon Association, said the document Trump signed Wednesday is a “shady deal” that takes away from fish about as much water as Los Angeles uses in a year, sacrificing delta habitat for short-term political gain.

The biological opinion “seizes more Northern California water, which will decimate the environment and the state’s valuable salmon runs to give to his supporters in the desert-like western San Joaquin Valley,” he said.

In December, the salmon association and other environmental groups sued the National Marine Fisheries Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to protect chinook salmon, steelhead trout and delta smelt — all listed under the Endangered Species Act.

The battle is over the amount of water pumped into the California Aqueduct by the State Water Project and federal Central Valley Project. The delta water is used to



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provide drinking water to more than 25 million Californians and irrigate 750,000 acres of cropland.

Water agencies currently divert more than half of the water that flows to the delta. In some rivers that feed the estuary, 80% of the water is siphoned off.

The problem is exacerbated by the fact that for many decades, portions of the San Joaquin River were completely dry, and even after flows were restored, the amount of water pouring into the delta is far below historic levels. The lack of fresh water flowing into the delta means more salty water from below can creep inland, hurting both farmers and the estuary.



BUTTONWILLOW, CA--James Morrison waves a flag as he waits in line to attend President Trump's visit to Bakersfield on Wednesday, Feb 19, 2020. Photo: Tomas Ovalle / Special to The Chronicle

Environmentalists say the lack of water in the delta is already killing off the delta smelt, a silvery fish 2 to 3 inches long that is uniquely adapted to the delta's shifting currents and brackish water. Biologists say the nearly complete absence of smelt in recent years is a sign of the overall lack of health of the ecosystem, including chinook.

The new releases that Trump promised Wednesday affect only the federal water supply, which is used primarily by growers in the dry San Joaquin Valley, and a few urban districts, including the Valley Water District in Santa Clara County.

Trump vowed to continue fighting for farmers, who he said "draw God's abundance from the Earth" and hopes Gov. Gavin Newsom would join him. The governor was, however, in no mood to join the president's campaign party, declaring Wednesday that he would go to court to stop the move.

Newsom and state water resources officials are in the process of negotiating voluntary agreements — instead of strict mandates — with farmers about the allotments from the state-run dams. That, too, is a hot topic, with some environmental and fishing groups accusing Newsom of being complicit in weakening regulations instead of fighting against the Trump administration's anti-environment agenda.

Farmers, meanwhile, claim they are losing crops and money during dry years because regulations over the years have favored fish over food.

“The science that comes out in these biological opinions says increased flows do not result in more fish,” said John Moore, the president of Kern County Farm Bureau and a fourth-generation farmer. “You can do both conservation and deliver water supplies, but nobody wants to come together and admit that we can work together.”

Federal officials said the biological opinion released in October was an attempt to strike a balance between irrigation and Sacramento River flows.

Opponents say the original document, submitted last July, determined that pumping increases would, in fact, jeopardize fish. They claim it was revised by Bernhardt, a former water lobbyist, for political reasons.

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Peter Fimrite is The Chronicle's lead science reporter, covering environmental, atmospheric and ecosystem science. His beat includes earthquake research, marine biology, wildfire science, nuclear testing, archaeology, wildlife and scientific exploration of land and sea. He also writes about the cannabis industry, outdoor adventure, Native American issues and the culture of the West. A former U.S. Forest Service firefighter, he has traveled extensively and covered a wide variety of issues during his career, including the Beijing Olympics, Hurricane Katrina, illegal American tourism in Cuba and a 40-day cross country car trip commemorating the history of automobile travel in America.

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