

Trump signs declaration for delivering more Northern California water to Central Valley farmers

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President Donald Trump signs his administration's reworking of environmental regulations that will direct more of the state's water to farmers and other agriculture interests in the Central Valley. Alex Harvath/The Californian

President Donald Trump, speaking to a cheering crowd next to Meadows Field Airport, moved forward Wednesday with a controversial plan intended to give Central Valley farmers more water from the environmentally sensitive Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta east of San Francisco.

Trump signed a presidential memorandum that, along with finalization Wednesday of a federal "record of decision," is intended to bring new flexibility to the operation of two main conduits bringing water south from Northern California, the Central Valley Project and the State Water Project.

California Attorney General Xavier Becerra immediately responded with a news release saying the state would soon challenge the action, adding that "California won't allow the Trump Administration to destroy and deplete our natural resources."

Farming groups and Central Valley politicians have hailed the Trump administration's proposal as a breakthrough that would provide water badly needed by California's agricultural industry. The plan could also boost water deliveries to Southern California urban areas.



Students from Frontier High School FFA program walk to the hangar where President Donald Trump's visit with local farmers about efforts to improve the supply and delivery of water in California and other Western states at Meadows Field Airport. Alex Horvath/The Californian

But environmentalists, together with fishing and tribal groups, say the proposal could push salmon and other endangered species to the brink of extinction. They urged Gov. Gavin Newsom to block the plan.

Trump, after being introduced to a crowd of more than 3,000 people by Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Bakersfield, accused state officials of years of water mismanagement. He said he had come to take "historic action" on behalf of California farmers and ranchers.

"Millions and millions of gallons are just being wasted and poured into the ocean," he said. "You deserve water and you have the water. There are communities that don't have the water. You have water. This is an easy one."

The president's action was largely expected and some said the event's bigger value was as a political stop to shore up support for Republican candidates in one of California's most conservative regions.

Movement toward more irrigation water for the Central Valley follows a landmark executive memo Trump signed Oct. 19, 2018. It called for timely progress on rewriting federal biological opinions that have limited water deliveries from the delta. The memo also prioritized development of water storage projects in the state.

Federal officials say the administration's year-old water-diversion plan protects endangered species through real-time monitoring of fish populations. That's expected to provide greater

flexibility for pumping water out of the delta, which currently is calendar-based. The proposal would also provide \$1.5 billion over 10 years to support endangered fish.

It's unclear whether, or how much, the federal proposal would conflict with Newsom's ongoing efforts to bring together various parties in support of so-called "voluntary agreements" for the future management of water through the delta.

These agreements, spelled out in a 15-year program, call for 900,000 acre-feet of new water flows to help endangered fish, 60,000 in new or restored habitat and \$5.2 billion for environmental improvements. Observers say the plan would give water agencies new flexibility to use delta water.

Also unclear was whether the Trump administration's plan would require a state permit — Newsom administration officials said they did not know — and whether more water for the federally operated Central Valley project might mean less water for the State Water Project.

Newsom, who has said he wants to find a middle ground between the positions of farmers and environmentalists, wrote Monday to U.S. Department of the Interior Sec. David Bernhardt, saying his administration "remains committed" to resolving the differences that remain after more than a year of working with federal officials to finalize the voluntary agreements.

Environmental groups have slammed the federal proposal. The Sierra Club asserted it would cut California's drinking water supply, reduce water for endangered fish and divert more water to the president's supporters.

"The Trump administration has essentially decided to distribute California's limited water to benefit its wealthy, well-connected friends," the group wrote in a news release Wednesday.

McCarthy, the House minority leader, has worked with Trump to remove obstacles to greater water shipments to the Central Valley. On Sunday, in what he later called a preview to Trump's visit to Kern, he told Fox News that California needs a more secure food supply.

"This president has worked greatly using science, not based on politics but on science, to allow to have more of that water stay with the Californians and America to make sure we're secure in our food supply as we move forward," he said.

Newsom released a statement saying the state's legal challenge to Trump's plan would be filed within days.

"Our goal continues to be to realize enforceable voluntary agreements that provide the best immediate protection for delta species, reliable and safe drinking water and dependable water sources for our farmers for economic prosperity," the governor stated. "This is the best path forward to sustain our communities, our environment and our economy."

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