

# Los Angeles Times

## Trump vows more water for Central Valley farmers, less for fish. Can he deliver?

By Bettina Boxall Staff Writer  
Feb. 19, 2020 5:41 PM BAKERSFIELD —

Following a golf fundraiser outside Palm Springs, President Trump swung through Bakersfield on Wednesday to claim credit for sending “a magnificent amount” of water to Central Valley farms.

As a cheering crowd of supporters watched, Trump signed [a memo directing federal agencies](#) to move ahead with relaxed endangered species protections that have curbed water deliveries to San Joaquin Valley agriculture and the urban Southland.

Gov. Gavin Newsom’s administration said Wednesday that it would challenge the federal action in court.

The signing ceremony, held in a large hangar at a Bakersfield airport, doubled as a campaign event in a part of California where oil pumps and thirsty agriculture reign and where Trump handily beat Hillary Clinton in the 2016 election. It was standing-room only, with a huge American flag behind the president.

Trump took swipes at San Francisco’s homelessness problem: “It’s worse than a slum.” He also insulted Democratic presidential candidates, calling Michael R. Bloomberg “mini Mike” who “hates the farm,” and Sen. Bernie Sanders “crazy Bernie.”

The president said “a wonderful” trade agreement with China would produce \$50 billion in business for U.S. farmers and inaccurately said California was rationing household water use. He said changes to endangered species protections would put an end to pouring “millions and millions of gallons of fresh, beautiful clean water from up north into the Pacific Ocean.”

In signing Wednesday’s memo, Trump sought to highlight an environmental rollback he set in motion shortly before the 2018 midterm election, when he signed a separate directive promising to bring “a lot of water” to Central Valley growers, some of his biggest California boosters.

Chief among the beneficiaries are wealthy farmers served by the Westlands Water District, a sprawling irrigation agency that Interior Secretary David Bernhardt represented for years as a Washington lawyer and lobbyist before joining the Trump administration.



President Trump and House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy speak on water accessibility Wednesday in Bakersfield. (Jim Watson / AFP/Getty Images)

Bernhardt and several of the Republican U.S. House members from the Central Valley who watched Trump sign the 2018 memo were on hand Wednesday, including House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy of Bakersfield, Devin Nunes, Tom McClintock and David Valadao, who is trying to reclaim the House seat he lost two years ago when Democrats flipped his district.

Trump's 2018 memo was issued as two federal fishery agencies were in the process of updating endangered species protections for native fish that swim in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, California's water hub.

Despite that pressure, scientists with the National Marine Fisheries Service last summer concluded that the [proposed delta pumping increases would probably jeopardize](#) the continued existence of endangered winter-run Chinook salmon and other imperiled fish.

The finding, which would have made it difficult to significantly ramp up deliveries from the delta, [did not make it into the final rules package](#), which was released last fall and formally adopted Wednesday.

As is the case with many of Trump's efforts to weaken environmental regulations, obstacles remain.

Environmental groups that succeeded in overturning a similar cut to fish protections under the George W. Bush administration have already filed a federal lawsuit challenging the rollback.

The California Fish and Wildlife Department is on record [saying that delta fish protections need "strengthening, not weakening."](#)



House Republican leader Kevin McCarthy and President Donald Trump react as farmer Larry Starrh praises the President's efforts towards farmers. (Alex Horvath / The Californian)



President Donald Trump shows off a memorandum on California water accessibility in Bakersfield. (Alex Horvath / The Californian)

And on Wednesday, Newsom announced he would move ahead with a threat to sue the Interior Department over the rollback. The governor said in a statement that Trump's move would undermine "enforceable voluntary agreements" on water his administration has been negotiating. "This is the best path forward to sustain our communities, our environment and our economy," Newsom said.

Trump's move is the latest salvo in a three-decade fight over delta water supplies.

As delta exports to the San Joaquin Valley and Southern California increased, populations of smelt, salmon and other native fish plunged to the edge of extinction, triggering restrictions on the powerful pumps that fill southbound aqueducts.

Big dams and massive diversions upstream of the delta also rob the estuary of nearly half the water that would naturally flow into it.

Invasive aquatic species, polluted runoff and loss of habitat have all contributed to the delta's decline. But biologists have repeatedly said that what smelt and migrating salmon need most is more fresh water flowing into the delta and out to sea.

The tug of war has spawned a long cycle of lawsuits. When protections are strengthened, water users sue. When they are relaxed, environmental groups sue.

Earlier Wednesday, Trump landed in Palm Springs to attend a fundraiser at Oracle Chairman Larry Ellison's Porcupine Creek golf course. At the Rancho Mirage resort, attendees were offered photos with the president for \$100,000, and photos, golf and a round-table discussion with him for \$250,000, the Palm Springs Desert Sun reported.



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<https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-02-19/trump-promises-valley-farmers-more-water-but-ca-n-he-snap-his-fingers-and-make-it-happen>