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Public Agencies Oppose New Threat To Statewide Water Supply
*California Fish & Game Commission's Proposed Restrictions to Address Fish Decline
Called "Major Threat" And "Without Merit"*

Sacramento, CA – The State Water Contractors, a statewide organization of 27 public water agencies, voiced serious concern today regarding California Fish & Game Commission proposed regulations that could impose drastic new restrictions on pumping out of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta (Delta) to protect longfin smelt, a small fish species that is found in several estuaries along the northern Pacific Coast. The Commission will consider these proposed regulations, which public water agencies consider a major potential threat to statewide water supply, in a hearing this Friday.

The California Department of Water Resources estimates these restrictions could reduce water supplies by approximately one (1) million acre-feet in wet and average year conditions and by 600,000 acre-feet in dry conditions from both the State Water Project (SWP) and federal Central Valley Project (CVP). In average year conditions, these constraints represent approximately 17% of anticipated supply for the two projects, which serve as California's primary water delivery systems.

These proposed restrictions are in addition to severe cutbacks already imposed to address the decline of another similar fish species, the Delta smelt. Last year, a federal judge cut 660,000 acre-feet from the water system, a 31% reduction that could have served 5.3 million Californians for one year.

In a worst case scenario, restrictions to protect both Delta smelt and longfin smelt in 2009 could amount to nearly a 50% slash in water deliveries from the state's primary water delivery systems.

"If the Fish and Game Commission adopts these draconian proposals, we'll be looking at a scary situation," said Laura King Moon, assistant general manager of the State Water Contractors.

"The significant drawbacks of this proposal are way out of proportion to its benefits -- there's no guarantee that these restrictions will even protect the fish. We are in the midst of a governor-declared drought and the worst economic downturn in recent memory. This is the wrong time to propose regulations that could have severe impacts on California's economy while offering little, if any, help to the longfin smelt."

These proposed regulations for longfin smelt could impact pumping levels in December, January and February, but are most likely to impact operations in January and/or February. The consideration of

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these cuts would be triggered at the sole discretion of one individual -- the Director of the California Department of Fish and Game -- if as few as six fish are present near the SWP and CVP pumps during these months.

Public water agencies are critical of the proposed restrictions because they only focus on project pumping operations. Ignored in the proposal are other potential causes for the decline in Delta fish species currently being explored by scientists, including invasive species, ammonia discharges from wastewater treatment plants, other toxics, power plant operations and numerous local diversions. Fish surveys have repeatedly shown that the bulk of the longfin smelt population in the Delta is miles to the west of the water projects and out of their influence. The Fish and Game Commission is reviewing new restrictions for pumping operations in December even though the two projects have not salvaged a single longfin smelt in this month since 2003.

“These proposed restrictions continue the past practice of narrowly focusing on project pumping to protect Delta fish species, an effort that lacks scientific merit and hasn’t demonstrated any benefit,” said Moon.

“Trying to protect fish in the Delta in this manner could devastate our water supply and is an irresponsible strategy,” added Moon. “Rather than continually chipping away at water supply, we need a comprehensive strategy that protects fish in the Delta and ensures Californians have water for their farms, homes and businesses. Unprecedented cutbacks are not the answer, especially in these tough economic times.”

In addition to regulatory cutbacks, California has been hit with ongoing dry conditions. State reservoirs are drying up and many are at their lowest levels in years. To make matters worse, the water crisis goes beyond these regulatory and weather conditions. Twenty-five million Californians and more than three million acres of agricultural land currently get their water supplies moved through the Delta. However, the water delivered through the Delta is at risk because of the estuary’s failing condition, antiquated levees and the threat of natural disaster.

Public water agencies, environmental organizations, and state and federal agencies are working together to develop a long-term solution. The Bay Delta Conservation Plan (BDCP), a comprehensive conservation plan for the Delta, is researching new ways to protect the struggling ecosystem by physically separating its natural tidal movements from the conveyance of water supplies, a strategy that has been identified as the best way to restore and protect the Delta ecosystem and ensure a reliable water supply for California. For more information on the BDCP, please visit <http://www.resources.ca.gov/bdcp/>.

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The State Water Contractors is a statewide, non-profit association of 27 public agencies from Northern, Central and Southern California that purchase water under contract from the California State Water Project. Collectively the State Water Contractors deliver water to more than 25 million residents throughout the state and more than 750,000 acres of agricultural lands. For more information on the State Water Contractors, please visit www.swc.org.