

**Headline: Water rationing could be on horizon**  
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Silicon Valley may be heading toward its first mandatory water rationing in 16 years, after a federal judge's decision to protect a tiny endangered fish by reducing the amount of water that can be pumped from San Francisco Bay's delta.

Santa Clara Valley Water District officials said Tuesday that they will produce a range of options - including mandatory rationing - by November for the district's board to consider for 2008.

"We may find that we need to go back and ask for more conservation - perhaps even mandatory conservation," said Walt Wadlow, a chief operating officer of the district, based in San Jose. "Even if we have an average rainfall year, it is going to feel like a long-term drought year in terms of the water available from the delta."

The last time Silicon Valley faced mandatory water rationing was during the 1987-1992 drought. The stiffest cutbacks came during 1991, when residents were required to cut water use 25 percent or face fines.

"If we have a lot of local rainfall in the winter that will make it easier to get through next year," Wadlow said. "But we'll have to do the planning this fall. In the water planning business, you are always looking ahead."

The district provides water to 1.7 million people in Silicon Valley by acting as a wholesaler to 13 retail agencies, such as the San Jose Water Co., that stretch from Gilroy to Los Altos Hills.

### **Drinking water**

The delta is a vast network of sloughs and marshes where the state's two largest rivers - the Sacramento and the San Joaquin - meet. Home to birds, fish and other wildlife, the delta also provides drinking water to 25 million people from the Bay Area to Los Angeles and irrigates expanses of Central Valley farmland. In most years, it provides 50 percent of the drinking water to Santa Clara County, with the other 50 percent coming from local groundwater pumping.

But the delta has faced increasing turmoil, from crumbling levees to collapsing fish populations.

The ruling on its future, by U.S. District Judge Oliver Wanger in Fresno, came Friday night.

Tuesday, when farm leaders and government water managers returned to work, the ruling still was reverberating as a landmark moment in California's centurylong battles over water.

"This is very significant. I can't think of a decision that had bigger water supply impacts than this, and I've been doing this for 33 years. This is a big deal," said Jerry Johns, deputy director of the California Department of Water Resources in Sacramento.

But it was not unexpected.

Four environmental groups sued the U.S. Department of Interior in 2005, arguing that increased pumping of fresh water from the delta had so degraded the area that the delta smelt, a three-inch translucent fish, was nearing extinction.

The groups contended that the Bush administration had not done enough to protect the smelt when the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service issued rules known as a "biological opinion" to guide how the giant pumps of the State Water Project and Central Valley Project near Tracy should operate. The judge agreed.

Environmentalists and many biologists contend the smelt are an indicator of the health of the entire delta.

"This issue has been coming for some time. The water users have watched as the government has operated those projects remarkably irresponsibly," said Barry Nelson, senior policy analyst at the Natural Resources Defense Council in San Francisco, which was one of the plaintiffs.

"They were killing delta smelt, chinook salmon, splittail, green sturgeon - a whole assemblage of species," he said. "Now, the whole delta ecosystem is collapsing."

Farm and urban water organizations did not deny the smelt population has fallen as water exports from the delta have increased. Not only does the pumping of fresh water make the delta more saline, harming smelt and other fish, but they also are sucked into the massive pumps and killed.

### **Other causes**

Farm and urban water groups cited other causes, from pesticide runoff to an invasive clam, that also may be to blame. Wanger did not issue a written ruling.

Instead, he ordered from the bench that pumping from the delta be reduced from December to June when smelt are present near the huge pumps until the Fish and Wildlife Service writes a new biological opinion next year. That document also must pass muster with him.

Wanger, appointed to the bench by President Reagan, required that two waterways in the delta, Old River and Middle River, which now run backward because of the pumping, must stop running backward enough that the smelt are no longer at risk of extinction.

How much pumping from the delta will have to be reduced is not known yet. Johns estimates it could range from 10 percent to as high as 35 percent. The judge gave the environmentalists and federal and state governments until mid-October to write up his order in legal water terminology.

Three million Bay Area residents from Contra Costa County to Silicon Valley rely on delta water. Farmers, particularly those in the San Joaquin Valley, are expected to be hardest hit.

"I'd say nervous is putting it lightly," said Dave Kranz, a spokesman for the California Farm Bureau Federation in Sacramento.

Kranz said farmers will have to make tough decisions in a few months about what to plant for next year.

"We know that this is going to have real impacts on real people," he said. "There are family farmers and their employees who are going to be affected by this, and all the communities whose livelihoods depend on agriculture."

Options, he said, include more drip irrigation, buying satellite images of fields to more efficiently apply water and fallowing land.

Nelson, the environmentalist, noted that farmers use 80 percent of the water in California. Much of that goes for relatively low-value crops such as rice, cotton and alfalfa. While many urban residents pay more than \$400 an acre foot for water, farmers often pay less than \$100.

### **Conservation urged**

There is plenty of water, Nelson said, if farmers and cities use it more efficiently, including drip irrigation and low-flush toilets, along with more recycled water.

"The Department of Interior is currently writing more cheap contracts for farmers," Nelson said. "If water is a scarce commodity, we should treat it as a scarce commodity. If gas was a nickel a gallon, our energy problems would be much worse. That's what we're doing with water."

The huge issue - how to provide water to a growing population from a fragile delta - is expected to come to a head by Jan. 1, when a task force appointed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger issues recommendations. Those could include everything from reduced pumping to construction of a peripheral canal to move water around the eastern edge of the delta.

Johns said a canal would cost at least \$5 billion, yet would solve many problems. Voters, however, rejected the idea in 1982 when Northern Californians saw it as a water grab by Los Angeles.