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Climate and Environment

Trump reenters California's water wars. It's unclear who will win

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The Delta-Mendota Canal, right, in Firebaugh, is part of the federally managed Central Valley Project. (Brian van der Brug/Los Angeles Times)

President Trump has signed an order directing federal agencies to “maximize” water deliveries in California and “override” state policies if necessary.

Trump’s [executive order](#) outlines steps intended to increase the amount of water pumped from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.

The directive was praised by agencies that supply water to farmlands in the San Joaquin Valley, which could receive more water under the changes ordered by Trump.

Westlands Water District, the largest agricultural water supplier in the Central Valley, welcomed the executive order.

“It’s clear that what we’ve been doing for the past few decades has not been working; not for the people, for agriculture, or for the fish,” the district said in a written statement. Westlands General Manager Allison Febbo said the district intends to work with government agencies “to bring common sense back” to water management in the valley, one of the nation’s major food-producing regions.



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[Trump wants to upend California water policy. State officials say it could do harm.](#)

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Environmental groups said the measures Trump is seeking, if fully carried out, would be disastrous for populations of threatened and endangered fish, as well as the state’s commercial and recreational fisheries and the deteriorating ecosystem of the Delta.

“It would mean the loss of California’s most important wild salmon runs, devastating impacts on salmon fishing jobs, enormous degradation in Delta water quality,” said Barry Nelson, a policy representative for the fishing group Golden State Salmon Assn. He also flagged the issue of states’ rights: “This is a very clear statement that the Trump administration believes that California should not have the right to control its water resources.”

The order, posted on the White House website Sunday, directs the Interior and Commerce secretaries to “immediately take actions to override existing activities that unduly burden efforts to maximize water deliveries.”



Motors at the C.W. “Bill” Jones Pumping Plant in Tracy, Calif. (Katie Falkenberg / Los Angeles Times)

It calls for delivering more water via the federally managed Central Valley Project, one of the two main systems of aqueducts, dams and pumping facilities in California that transport supplies from the Delta southward. The president also directed the federal Bureau of Reclamation to ensure state agencies “do not interfere.”

In the order, Trump criticizes “disastrous” policies and water “mismanagement” by California, and directs federal agencies to scrap a plan that the Biden administration adopted last month, establishing new rules for operating the Central Valley Project and the State Water Project — California’s other main water delivery system in the Central Valley. Instead, Trump has told federal agencies to more or less follow a plan adopted during his first presidency, which California and environmental groups challenged in court arguing it failed to provide adequate protections for endangered fish.



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[Why the hydrants ran dry as firefighters battled California’s deadly wildfires](#)

Jan. 9, 2025

The order also attempts to link local water supply problems during the deadly Los Angeles County firestorms, such as [fire hydrants that ran dry](#), with changes in how water is managed in Northern California. It says the Trump administration is setting a new policy to “provide Southern California with necessary water resources.”

However, water experts and state officials said such [comments](#) are inaccurate.

“The premise of this executive order is false,” said Tara Gallegos, a spokesperson for Gov. Gavin Newsom. “We’re unclear what the administration’s concern with the current water policy is.”

She noted that California [pumps as much water now](#) as it could under prior policies during Trump’s first administration, and that because reservoirs in Southern California are at record-high levels, bringing in more water from Northern California would not have affected the fire response.

“There is no shortage of water in Southern California,” Gallegos said. “Water operations to move water south through the Delta have nothing to do with the local fire response in Los Angeles. Trump is either unaware of how water is stored in California or is deliberately misleading the public.”

*Trump is either unaware of how water is stored
in California or is deliberately misleading the public.*

— Tara Gallegos, spokesperson for Gov. Gavin Newsom

Gallegos said the state “looks forward to further dialogue with the federal government on securing our water supply for a hotter, drier future.”

Trump’s order focuses largely on the federally operated Central Valley Project, which delivers water from the Delta to farmlands that produce almonds, pistachios, tomatoes and other crops. The CVP ends in the southern San Joaquin Valley near Bakersfield and does not reach Southern California’s urban areas to the south.

“This is a manufactured crisis and water grab for the agricultural sector, who are mainly growing crops for export,” said Regina Chichizola of the advocacy group Save California Salmon.

In the San Joaquin Valley, agricultural water agencies have been under [growing pressure from state regulators](#) to curb chronic overpumping of groundwater, which has led to [declining aquifer levels](#), [sinking ground](#) and growing numbers of [dry household wells](#). Obtaining more water from the Central Valley Project could help some of these agencies address their water deficits.

Trump’s order is broadly worded, with some provisions laying out ways the administration could expedite water storage projects and waive protective measures for endangered fish species.



Climate and Environment

[Groundwater pumping is causing land to sink at record rate in San Joaquin Valley](#)

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For example, it calls for expediting “ongoing or potential major water-supply and storage projects” in California. It says the Interior and Commerce secretaries will each designate one official to coordinate environmental compliance for such projects, and develop a plan to “suspend, revise, or rescind any regulations or procedures that unduly burden such projects.”

Though the order does not specifically mention it, Trump has previously called for [raising Shasta Dam](#) to expand California’s largest reservoir. Nelson, of the Golden State Salmon Assn., believes parts of the order are intended to move forward that dam-raising plan by attempting to override protections in state law for the McCloud River, [which feeds into the reservoir](#).

Conservation advocates said the order lays the groundwork for the Trump administration to leverage a [rarely used amendment](#) to the Endangered Species Act that enables the convening of a committee to exempt a federal action from the endangered species law. This committee has been called the “[God Squad](#),” referring to its authority to render a decision that may cause a species to go extinct.

Environmental advocates said invoking this process could exempt the Central Valley Project’s pumping operations from measures that protect vulnerable fish species in the Delta and San Francisco Bay, rendering these federal protections nonexistent.

“I have been working on water issues for 40 years. I have never seen such a clear statement of an administration’s intent to devastate the Bay Delta system,” Nelson said.



President Trump signs executive orders in the Oval Office on Monday. (Evan Vucci / Associated Press)

In recent years, fish populations have [suffered major declines](#) in the Delta and San Francisco Bay.

Pumping to supply farms and cities has contributed to the ecological degradation of the Delta, where the fish species that are listed as threatened or endangered include steelhead trout, two types of Chinook salmon, longfin smelt, Delta smelt and green sturgeon.

Fisheries authorities have [shut down the salmon fishing season](#) in California the last two years because of declining salmon populations.

*"The Delta has been dying a death of a thousand cuts.
This will accelerate that death significantly."*

— *Barbara Barrigan-Parrilla, executive director of Restore the Delta*

In 2020, when the previous Trump administration adopted new water delivery rules that weakened environmental protections, the state and conservation groups successfully challenged the changes in court. That cleared the way for the Biden administration, working together with the Newsom administration, to [develop the current plan](#) and the supporting biological opinions, which determine how much water can be pumped and how river flows are managed.

Now, Trump is seeking to return to his administration’s 2020 rules, while imposing additional measures to increase pumping.

Trump’s order does not appear to directly affect California’s management of the State Water Project, the system that delivers water from the Delta to Los Angeles and other cities.

However, because state flow requirements to protect endangered fish will remain in place regardless of any federal changes, an increase in pumping by the federal system could, in theory, lead to a decrease in pumping by the state system and less water flowing to urban Southern California, said Greg Gartrell, a former manager of the Contra Costa Water District. “The whole situation is more complicated than turning a valve.”



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[As salmon populations struggle, California bans fishing on rivers for a second year](#)

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Gary Bobker, program director for the environmental group Friends of the River, said implementing the president’s wish list would “dehydrate California rivers, promote toxic algal blooms, cause a number of native species to go extinct — not just Delta smelt, but salmon, steelhead and sturgeon.”

The biggest winners would be agribusinesses in the San Joaquin Valley, not people living in fire-prone areas, Bobker said. “This exploitation of a humanitarian crisis to impose misinformed and destructive policies on California is an insult to the state’s residents and the victims of the wildfires.”

Trump’s order also [calls for emergency measures](#) to improve disaster response. It directs federal agencies to ensure that state and local governments “promote sensible land management practices,” calling for officials to report to the president on state policies “inconsistent with sound disaster prevention and response.”

It says the federal Office of Management and Budget will review all federal programs that support land management, water supply and disaster response.

The order also directs federal agencies to expedite housing options for those displaced by the fires, and develop a plan to quickly remove contaminated waste and debris from burned areas. It calls for investigating alleged “misuse” of federal grant funds by the city of Los Angeles.



Climate and Environment

[Visiting L.A. after firestorm, Trump focuses on overhauling California water policy](#)

January 24, 2025

The order packages Trump’s goals for California water policy together with unrelated wildfire relief measures, said Felicia Marcus, a visiting fellow at Stanford University’s Water in the West Program.

“He’s sort of wrapping what he wants to do for other reasons into an L.A. disaster relief cloak, which isn’t cool,” Marcus said. “It distracts from the hard, real discussions that mature and reasonable federal and state water managers and stakeholders need to have to figure out how we manage California water resources for all the things that are important to Californians, which include urban use, agricultural use, recreational use, fish and wildlife.”



Ian James is a reporter who focuses on water and climate change in California and the West. Before joining the Los Angeles Times in 2021, he was an environment reporter at the Arizona Republic and the Desert Sun. He previously worked for the Associated Press as a correspondent in the Caribbean and as bureau chief in Venezuela. Follow him on Bluesky @ianjames.bsky.social and on X @BylanJames.

<https://www.latimes.com/environment/story/2025-01-27/trump-california-water-order>