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Trump Seeks to Assert More Control Over California's Water

The president, who has assailed California's leaders over wildfires, issued the directive in an executive order that was dated Friday but released on Sunday.



A street lined with rubble and burned-out buildings. A yellow fire hydrant is in the foreground. Fires destroyed the Pacific Palisades neighborhood of Los Angeles earlier this month. Credit...Erin Schaff/The New York Times

By Zach Montague and Catrin Einhorn

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The White House on Sunday released an executive order by President Trump that laid out a plan to exert the federal government's role in California's complex water management operations and claimed its authority to overrule state officials.

[The order](#), dated Friday, comes after Mr. Trump traveled to the state to see the devastation from wildfires that have been raging in Los Angeles for weeks. It put formal directives behind Mr. Trump's [steady criticism of California's leaders](#) and their response to the fires.

In a section titled “Overriding Disastrous California Policies,” the order tasked more than half a dozen agencies with finding ways to circumvent federal and state laws that control various aspects of water management in California. It also directed the Interior Department to make decisions about how to supply water around the state, “notwithstanding any contrary state or local laws.”

More confrontational language in the order directed federal officials to stake out their authority without necessarily working alongside the state officials who manage the state’s reservoirs and plan for droughts and fires.

Interior Department officials “shall take all available measures to ensure that state agencies — including the California Department of Water Resources — do not interfere with the Bureau of Reclamation’s operation of the project,” the order said, referring to a federally operated network of dams, reservoirs, canals and other facilities.

Many of the actions outlined in the order relate to restrictions governed by the Endangered Species Act, since the region is home to several imperiled fish. One of them attempts to convene a committee known as the God Squad that can override the law, ultimately leading to the extinction of a species. Conservation groups blasted the order and threatened to sue depending on how it is implemented.

Despite the language of the executive order, the White House is constrained by existing federal laws, state laws and nature, said Karrigan Bork, a law professor at the University of California, Davis, and the interim director of its Center for Watershed Sciences.

“I don’t think it changes things very much,” Mr. Bork said of the order. “And it certainly doesn’t change California’s hydrology, which imposes the most significant limits on the amount of water that can flow to the Central Valley and Southern California.”

Water wars in California have long pitched the agriculture industry, which relies on diverted water, against fisheries and conservationists.

“This is a manufactured crisis and water grab for the agricultural sector,” Regina Chichizola, the executive director of Save California Salmon, a tribally led nonprofit, said in a statement.

Mr. Trump has long blamed the delta smelt, a small and unassuming fish on the brink of extinction, for causing too much of California’s water to flow into the Pacific Ocean. The species lives in Northern California’s [Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta](#), where water that was once mountain snow or rain meets the saltwater of the sea. It is one of seven threatened or endangered fish that can be harmed when too much water is diverted from the Delta. But the fish are not the only ones that need water flowing. If too much water is diverted, it can become too salty for farming and drinking, both in the Delta and further south, experts say.

The order also delegated a number of responsibilities — from clearing debris to providing emergency housing for people displaced by the fires — to the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

But this aspect the order was in contrast to Mr. Trump’s recent comments about disaster response. He has insisted that state officials should take the lead in steering recovery efforts and even [mused about eliminating FEMA](#).

[Upon arriving in California on Friday](#), Mr. Trump met with both Gov. Gavin Newsom and Mayor Karen Bass of Los Angeles, briefly suspending criticism and pledging to help by waiving federal permits to speed up the rebuilding process.

“We are looking to get something completed,” Mr. Trump said at the meeting. “The way you get something completed is you work together.”

But after the text of the order was released on Sunday, Mr. Newsom’s office accused the president of ginning up a crisis based on a dishonest assessment of the situation on the ground.

While Mr. Trump has insisted that the [fires in Los Angeles](#) could have been avoided entirely by pumping more water from Northern California to the south, many reservoirs in the region are at or above [historical averages](#). When firefighters battling the blazes in Los Angeles struggled with dry hydrants, [it had nothing to do](#) with the amount of water available from the north.

“There is no imaginary spigot to magically make water appear at a wildfire, despite what Trump claims,” Tara Gallegos, a spokesman for Mr. Newsom, said in a statement on Sunday.

“Water operations to move water south through the Delta have nothing to do with the local fire response in Los Angeles,” she said. “Trump is either unaware of how water is stored in California or is deliberately misleading the public.”

A spokesman for Mr. Trump did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The executive order gave the agencies involved 15 days to report back to the White House about what authorities they have to exert greater control over California’s water infrastructure. It came nearly a week after Mr. Trump’s first day in office, when he issued another order directing federal officials to come up with ways to route more water to other parts of the state.



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