

Trump orders more Central Valley water deliveries — claiming it would help LA fires



by Alister Bland

January 28, 2025



The Friant-Kern canal is part of the Central Valley Project, a federal water system that delivers water to farms. Trump ordered federal agencies to deliver more water. Photo by David McNew, Getty Images

In summary: Citing the LA fires, Trump directed federal agencies to “immediately take actions to override” water operations and environmental rules. But the water mostly serves Central Valley farms.

President Donald Trump signed [a sweeping executive order](#) Sunday that told federal agencies to “immediately take action” to deliver more Central Valley water and eliminate rules that stand in the way, including endangered species protections.

In the new order, Trump cited the Los Angeles fires, even though the actions he is ordering — delivering more water from the federal [Central Valley Project](#) — would

primarily serve farms. About 75% of Central Valley Project water [is used for agriculture](#), while much of the rest goes to cities and towns in the San Joaquin Valley, including Sacramento and Fresno.

“In particular, the Secretary of the Interior and the Secretary of Commerce shall immediately take actions to override existing activities that unduly burden efforts to maximize water deliveries,” Trump’s order reads.

“Do not be fooled by Trump’s lies: none of the policies in this executive order will move even a single drop of extra water to communities devastated by these wildfires. This administration is presenting us with a false choice.”

–U.S. Representative Jared Huffman

At stake are the rules that guide two massive Delta water systems, the federal Central Valley Project and a state-operated system, the State Water Project. These networks of reservoirs, pumps and canals deliver water to millions of acres of farmland and 30 million people. They draw water from rivers that flow into the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta and San Francisco Bay, which imperils Chinook salmon, smelt and sturgeon that are protected by the federal Endangered Species Act.

Trump ordered federal agencies to “expedite action related to any exemption under the Endangered Species Act...for the long-term operation” of the water delivery systems. In addition, he directed the federal Bureau of Reclamation to “take all available measures to ensure that State agencies — including the California Department of Water Resources — do not interfere.” He entitled a section “Overriding Disastrous California Policies.”

Environmental groups are likely to sue if federal agencies override the Endangered Species Act when setting rules that control how much water is delivered via the Central Valley Project or State Water Project.

“Do not be fooled by Trump’s lies: none of the policies in this executive order will move even a single drop of extra water to communities devastated by these wildfires. This administration is presenting us with a false choice,” U.S. Rep. Jared Huffman, a California Democrat who is the ranking member of the House Natural Resources Committee, said in a statement Sunday. “Fishers, farmers, treasured species, and every water user all depend on our water resources – we do not have to pick winners or losers.”

Several community watchdog and environmental groups, including Restore the Delta and San Francisco Baykeeper, warned that Trump’s actions “will have devastating consequences for California’s water future, public health, and environmental

protections, threatening a federal takeover of California's right to manage its land and waters."

Noting that the actions would benefit farmers, San Francisco Baykeeper Science Director Jon Rosenfield called the administration "a lawless regime that uses extortion to enrich their political supporters."

The powerful [Westlands Water District](#), representing farmers in parts of Kings and Fresno counties, said Sunday that they welcome Trump's order. "The challenges that he highlights are real, and his leadership in addressing the barriers to water delivery are welcomed," the district said in a statement. "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."

Trump's order said "it is in the Nation's interest to ensure that California has what it needs to prevent and fight these fires and others in the future. Therefore, it is the policy of the United States to provide Southern California with necessary water resources, notwithstanding actively harmful State or local policies."

The environmental groups said Trump's directives "conflate fire prevention needs with water operations in California all based on the myth that water operations for environmental protections had any impact on water infrastructure used in the Los Angeles fires."

Some Los Angeles fire hydrants ran out of water fighting the fires, but city fire and utility officials say [it was caused by a sudden surge in demand and limited capacity of city pipelines](#), not lack of water supply. In addition, the city's water comes mostly from the Owens Valley, the Colorado River and groundwater, not the Delta or the Central Valley, and Southern California cities say they have ample supply after two wet winters.

"The premise of this executive order is false," said Newsom spokesperson Tara Gallegos. "Attempts to connect water management in Northern California to local wildfire fighting in Los Angeles have zero factual basis. California continues to pump as much water as it did under the Trump administration's policies, and water operations to move water south through the Delta have absolutely nothing to do with the local fire response in Los Angeles."

State [reservoirs in Southern California](#) are at above-average levels. "There is [no shortage of water in Southern California](#), which is why the Governor has [called for an investigation](#) into the local response," Gallegos said.

Rosenfield said the State Water Project ensures, even in the worst of droughts, that communities have a minimum share of water designated for purposes of "human health and safety," which includes firefighting needs. "They always deliver that human health and safety water, always — it's never interrupted," Rosenfield said.



Farmworkers work on a field in Fresno County. Farmers in that area receive water from the Delta. Photo by Larry Valenzuela, CalMatters/CatchLight Local

The Central Valley Project provides about 5 million acres feet of water to farms, enough to irrigate about a third of the agricultural land in California, according to the Bureau of Reclamation. It also delivers about 600,000 acre-feet for municipal and industrial use in the San Joaquin Valley and some Bay Area cities, enough to supply about 1 million households with water each year.

Trump called on the Bureau of Reclamation to operate the Central Valley Project with rules that his first administration implemented in 2020. Reverting to those rules could override rules signed into law in December by Biden administration officials and endorsed by Gov. Gavin Newsom administration officials. The Biden rules would reduce Central Valley Project farm deliveries, but the State Water Project — which serves Southern California cities as well as San Joaquin Valley farms — would receive [more water](#) compared to Trump’s 2020 rules.

Directors of the state’s water and resources agencies could not be reached for comment.

Ryan Endean, a public information officer with the California Department of Water Resources, said in a statement last week that his agency stands by its new Delta water management rules. Under those rules, Endean said, “farms and cities have the potential to gain additional water supply, while endangered species are protected. To abandon these new frameworks would harm California water users and protection of native fish species.”

Experts say the Bay-Delta ecosystem is collapsing, and salmon populations have declined so severely that commercial and recreational salmon fishing have been banned in California for two straight years — with [a third year expected, too](#).

The order follows a series of remarks in recent weeks by the President that reflect a profound misunderstanding of California’s water supply, weaving between inaccurate and fantastical.

In Pacific Palisades on Friday, while visiting with local leaders in the aftermath of the region’s wildfires, Trump said, “We have to have that water ... You’re talking about unlimited water coming down from the Pacific Northwest, even coming up from parts of Canada, and it pours down naturally ... you’ll never run out, you’ll never have shortages and you won’t have things like this, and when you do you’ll have a lot of water to put it out.” Water does not flow into California from Canada, and the Pacific Northwest does not feed into Central Valley rivers. Instead, the water comes largely from Sierra Nevada snowmelt.



Fall-run Chinook salmon migrate and spawn in the Feather River near a hatchery in Oroville, on Nov. 15, 2024. Their populations have been in severe decline largely because river waters have been diverted to farms and cities. Photo by Xavier Mascareñas, California Department of Water Resources

The order also includes provisions to expedite aid to victims of the Southern California wildfires and Hurricane Helene in North Carolina.

He ordered federal agencies to provide a plan that “expedites options for housing relief to survivors displaced by wildfires in California.” Also, “within 5 days from the date of this order,” he ordered federal agencies, including the Environmental Protection

Agency, to “expedite the bulk removal of contaminated and general debris” in order “to accelerate the rebuilding of areas devastated” by the wildfires.

County officials and the Army Corps of Engineers officials have warned homeowners in the fire zones that [sifting through debris and removing it could be harmful](#) without guidelines and precautions from the EPA for handling hazardous waste.



Alastair Bland, Environment Reporter, lives in Sonoma County, California. He writes about water, climate, marine research, agriculture and the environment, and his work has appeared at NPR, Time, East Bay Express, Audubon, Hakai, Slate, Smithsonian and other news outlets.

CalMatters is joining with our public media partners at PBS SoCal, LAist and KCRW to bring you reliable, essential, free information to support people affected by the wildfires and keep all Californians up to date. Sign up for the [Daily Wildfire Updates](#) newsletter.

<https://calmatters.org/environment/water/2025/01/trump-orders-central-valley-water-la-fires/>