



Media Release

State Water Board Adopts Order Protecting Endangered Steelhead and Senior Water Right Holders Impacted by the Cachuma Reservoir Project

Sept. 17, 2019

Contacts: George Kostyrko

George.Kostyrko@waterboards.ca.gov

SACRAMENTO – The State Water Resources Control Board today adopted an order for Cachuma Reservoir in Santa Barbara County to protect the endangered steelhead trout population and downstream senior water right holders.

The State Water Board action follows nearly 20 years of legal efforts to protect water right holders and address long-term declines in native fish populations in the Santa Ynez River.

“This order is an important step towards improving the condition of a struggling species, while continuing to develop the science and information needed to return the species to sustainable levels,” said State Water Board Chair E. Joaquin Esquivel. “I am hopeful that adoption of this order will inspire the parties to continue working collaboratively to resolve these long-standing water management challenges – challenges not unlike those found in other communities and watersheds throughout the state.”

[The Order requires](#) the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation to increase flows on the Santa Ynez River below Bradbury Dam to provide additional habitat for steelhead and prevent its extinction. To minimize impacts on local water users, higher flows will be required only during wetter years.

Historically, the Santa Ynez River was a major spawning ground and nursery stream that supported the largest steelhead run in Southern California. Damming the river in 1953 stored runoff for the Santa Barbara area, but blocked off crucial spawning and rearing habitat and reduced the average annual run from 20,000 adult fish to fewer than 100 today.

Similar to salmon, steelhead trout spend much of their life in the sea before returning to the place of birth in a freshwater stream to spawn. Southern California steelhead, which include the population of the Santa Ynez River, have been federally listed as an endangered species since 1997 and are on the brink of extinction.

State law (Fish and Game Code section 5937) requires that dam owners keep fish species below the dam in good condition. In its evaluation of the project, the Board determined that the steelhead were not in good condition and required actions that will help preserve the species.



Providing higher flows during wet years may reduce storage in Cachuma Reservoir going into drier years and could result in decreased supply for areas served by the reservoir during future droughts if alternatives, such as water conservation, are not utilized. The Order requires that water supply managers for communities in the Santa Barbara area served by Cachuma Reservoir implement conservation measures to prepare for future dry periods.

According to the order, the Bureau of Reclamation is also required to:

- Explore the potential for fish passage around the dam to provide access to additional habitat and present the findings within 24 months;
- Consider additional measures to replenish the steelhead population; and
- Study the effects of the increased flows on the fish.

If the flows fail to provide the anticipated benefit, or if the increased water supply results in impacts not identified in the final Environmental Impact Report, the instream flows will be reduced accordingly.

The State Water Board is responsible for issuing water rights permits and licenses and enforcing many of California's water laws. The agency also has broad authority to establish minimum flows and implement other measures to protect fisheries and other public trust resources.

More information is available on [the Cachuma Project page](#). [A fact sheet](#) is also available.

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