

Fish Die as Folsom's Flow is Cut

Thousands of young salmon, steelhead killed in a move to save water

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by Stuart Leavenworth, staff writer

Federal water managers killed thousands of baby salmon last week when they cut back flows into the American River below Folsom Dam. The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation had ramped up releases into the river to maintain water quality far downstream in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

But when they reduced flows last week to save water for later, they inadvertently stranded—left high and dry&—thousands of fall-run Chinook salmon and an undetermined number of steelhead trout, an endangered species.

Bureau officials say the fish stranding illustrates the tradeoffs of managing Folsom Lake, which is used for drinking water, hydroelectric power, recreation, fisheries and Delta water quality.

"You fix one thing and, whoops, something happens somewhere else," said Jeff McCracken, a spokesman for the reclamation bureau.

State biologists say they warned the bureau beforehand that quick drops in river flows could hurt the offspring of salmon that spawned last fall.

Hundreds of thousands of these fish are now hanging out in shallow side channels of the American River, and are vulnerable to rapid water drops, according to Mike Healey, a biologist with the California Department of Fish and Game.

"We are looking at a very high number of juvenile salmon," said Healey. "It couldn't have happened at a worse time."

Unnatural river fluctuations imperil fish across the West, as utilities and water managers vary their hydroelectric output or provide extra water for irrigation.

Last month, the Bureau of Reclamation increased flows in the American River from 3,500 to 5,500 cubic feet per second. Bureau officials say the extra flows prevented saltwater from creeping up the Delta and violating standards set in the Bay-Delta Accord, a state-federal pact for restoring the Delta.

Last week, the Bureau decreased flows in the river to about 2,500 cubic feet per second, said McCracken. Because of a relatively dry winter, federal officials are trying to save Folsom's water for drinking supplies and summer fish migrations.

Federal officials acknowledged that thousands of fish may have died but note than in any given year millions of salmon are born in the upper American River.

Healey said that at least 10,000 fish died, a significant loss, but noted that an accurate estimate of the kill is difficult.

"All the gulls and crows came in and picked them clean," he said.

Along with stranding young salmon, the reduced flows exposed the egg nests—"redds"—of steelhead trout, an endangered species, Healey said.

The flows could drop more.

Federal and state officials held a teleconference Tuesday to discuss plans for dropping the river farther.

The fish flap comes as federal and local officials are touting efforts to improve fish habitat in the American River, a major source of fall-run Chinook for the state's commercial and recreational fishing industries.

Last week, bureau officials showed off some of the \$2.3 million they are spending on a retrofit for Folsom Dam. The retrofit is aimed at providing colder water for young fish, such as those that perished last week.