

Statement for the Record

Bureau of Reclamation

U.S. Department of the Interior

House Committee on Natural Resources

Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife, and Fisheries

September 6, 2024

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this Statement for the Record on opportunities and challenges in California. The Bureau of Reclamation's (Reclamation) statement will focus primarily on our management of the Central Valley Project in California and its role in delivering multiple benefits for the people of that state.

Reclamation appreciates the Subcommittee's interest in and attention to the challenge of providing water in California and we look forward to working with the Subcommittee and Congress on opportunities to address this challenge. Water management decisions are inherently challenging as we strive to balance providing water supply while protecting the environment. Reclamation is working to meet California's water needs by making investments in our water supply infrastructure while also adjusting our planning and water management operations. We recognize that while there may be differences on water management decisions, we aim to work with the Subcommittee on infrastructure investments that can help California capture more of the flood flows that are increasingly common with our changing climate and use that much-needed water during droughts, while making parallel investments in restoring fish populations and the environment.

The federal Central Valley Project (CVP) and the State Water Project (SWP) together provide water for over 25 million Californians, millions of acres of some of the most productive farmland in the world, and 19 federal, State of California (State), and local wildlife refuges along the Pacific Flyway. The projects reduce the risks of catastrophic flooding, buttress against severe drought, protect and restore habitat for many rare and unique species, supplement local water supplies for communities, produce low carbon hydroelectric power, maintain water quality in the Sacramento and San Joaquin Delta (Delta), and support important commercial and recreational fisheries.

Over the last decade, California and the West have endured recurring periods of drought, as well as environmental stressors that have negatively impacted fish and other sensitive species in the Delta. These drought conditions were exceptional, at least as compared to the historic record, with record-high temperatures and record-low levels of snowpack and precipitation. 2023 was a historically wet water year in parts of California, with a total state-wide annual precipitation of 33.56", 141% of average. The wet hydrologic conditions we experienced left most of the reservoirs throughout the State in good shape as we progressed to the 2024 water year. However,

this year has seen average precipitation, with snow and rain at 90% of average in the Northern Sierra and 83% of average in the San Joaquin. Alternating cycles of drought and flood have affected the Delta and the State's water supply as a whole and are expected to become the new normal over the coming decades.

As these boom-bust weather patterns continue in California and throughout the West, the critical importance of resilient water supplies and modern water infrastructure both to the health of our families and the economic vitality of our communities becomes ever more apparent. The Department of the Interior and Reclamation are committed to working with our partners to modernize our water infrastructure, address drought resiliency, improve water supply reliability, foster climate change adaptation, and improve ecosystem health.

Through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) and the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), Reclamation is deploying nearly \$13 billion across the West, supporting rehabilitation of aging infrastructure, completion of rural water projects, expansion of surface water storage, completion of Indian water rights settlements, and improved ecosystem restoration and drought resilience. Combined, these laws represent the largest investment in climate resilience in the nation's history and provide much-needed resources to enhance Western communities' preparedness for drought and climate change.

To date, Reclamation has selected 820 distinct projects from the IIJA and IRA, totaling more than \$6.25 billion. More than \$3.0 billion of that has been deployed in California. Reclamation is putting these resources to work in communities and on projects with the greatest impact. Examples include the creation of new or expanded storage at B.F. Sisk Dam/San Luis Reservoir in Merced County and Los Vaqueros Reservoir in Contra Costa County, and the new Sites Reservoir in Glenn and Colusa Counties.

We are committed to ensuring these investments deliver meaningful results. However, challenges remain. The dramatic and widespread effects of California's recent drought have challenged the ability of the Central Valley Project to sustain the benefits it was designed to deliver. The California of the 21st century is a much different and more complex place than when the CVP was constructed. Changing hydrologic conditions brought on by a warming climate is shifting the timing and intensity of spring runoff. Invasive species and habitat loss have amplified some of the CVP's negative effects on native species. The warmer temperatures are causing precipitation that used to fall as snow which melted in the spring to instead fall as rain which runs off immediately, often at a time when it can't be captured.

The CVP was designed around the expectation of a snowpack which would build over the winter and melt in the spring to maximize water supply throughout the summer. The shifting from snow to rain in the winter puts a greater pressure on the CVP's substantial but finite reservoir storage. Creeping sea level rise means more water releases are needed to push back salinity in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Bay-Delta, which provides critical water supply for the Bay Area as well as central and southern California. The operation of the Central Valley Project must be updated to continue to meet the needs of people and the environment. The alternative is more conflict and conditions that favor neither water users nor the environment. Responding to the

challenge requires a planning strategy that anticipates worst-case scenarios without compromising the many benefits of the Central Valley Project.

In order to consider ways to better meet those goals and achieve a coordinated operations plan, Reclamation reinitiated consultation on the Long-Term Operation of the CVP and SWP in September 2021. The consideration of options follows a transparent, participatory, and science-driven process for the development of alternatives and an analysis of environmental impacts. Since consultation was reinitiated, Reclamation has been meeting with agencies and interested parties to work together to consider revised operations of dams, powerplants, and related facilities of the CVP and SWP. An unprecedented degree of transparency has gone into the process to date as Reclamation and its partners work through technical analyses and develop options for new operating rules. This includes monthly interested party meetings, quarterly public meetings, and numerous direct outreach efforts to relevant groups and individuals.

The proposed plan includes five alternatives reflecting a reasonable range of alternatives for the long-term operation of the Central Valley Project and Delta facilities of the State Water Project. The draft EIS was prepared in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act and is now available for a 45-day public comment period that ends on September 9, 2024. There were five public meetings in August and one scheduled in September to provide an overview of the plan with opportunities for the general public to comment and ask questions. The aim is to have an executed Record of Decision by the end of the calendar year.

While the new Biological Opinions are being developed, Reclamation and California have been operating the CVP and SWP under a court-ordered interim operations plan (IOP). The 2024 IOP adopts several aspects of the Department of Water Resources Incidental Take Permit, including different Delta Smelt and Winter-run protections. Delta operations are therefore controlled at any time by the 2024 IOP conditions, the 2019 BO and/or water rights permit conditions under California State Water Board's Water Right Decision D-1641. There is a high level of uncertainty during the spring export period regarding which regulations will come into play as a result of hydrology, and to what degree those regulations might limit operations. The effects of these regulations on water supply are largely driven by Sacramento River and San Joaquin River conditions which are dependent on hydrology, reservoir management and pulse flow considerations on San Joaquin tributaries, among other factors.

As a result of these uncertain and variable conditions, initial South-of-Delta CVP water supply allocations in February 2024 were lower than anticipated due to below average precipitation totals at the time of the February 1st water supply forecast as well as large uncertainties in the expected spring regulations. Subsequent increases in March (15% to 35%), April (35% to 40%), and June (40% to 50%) were limited due to long-term hydrology, real-time fishery conditions and regulatory constraints detailed in the IOP and 2019 Biological Opinions. All these factors combine to make it difficult to compare water years given the complicated nature of the CVP's and SWP's operational environment. Nevertheless, Reclamation, our federal partner agencies, and the State of California coordinate every day to optimize the benefits from these projects and the investments being made in them, and help shape the updated future regulatory requirements under which the projects operate.

Conclusion

The Department of the Interior and Reclamation understand the importance of the CVP to the many communities we serve. We are strongly committed to working closely with the Subcommittee on water supply and environmental protection needs. Reclamation is determined to incorporate the best available science into our investments in and decisions on the operation of the CVP for all its authorized purposes – for river regulation, improvement of navigation, and flood control; irrigation and domestic uses; fish and wildlife mitigation, protection, and restoration; power generation; and fish and wildlife enhancement. Reclamation must operate the CVP within a complex environment that serves multiple parties and interests and ensure the ability of State and federal agencies to balance these interests. With the CVP and all its other projects, Reclamation strives to collaborate with our partners using the best available science and the collective experience of a world-class team to make sustainable decisions that take into account dynamic and complex environments in which we operate.