

**Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries
Legislative Hearing
1334 Longworth House Office Building
May 20, 2025
10:30AM**

Statement for the Record: Congressman Adam Gray

I want to take this opportunity of having the Acting Deputy Director of Operations of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services here today to bring an important issue in my district to light. As you all know, water is vital to the Central Valley. Our agriculture, energy, ecosystems, and communities are all dependent on reliable access to water. That's why the Central Valley Project Voluntary Agreements, which represent a collaborative and science-based alternative to rigid regulation, are so important. I represent one of the key players in this conversation, the Merced Irrigation District. Since the 1960s, MID has owned and operated the New Exchequer Hydroelectric Project, which includes Lakes McClure and McSwain. This project delivers enormous value - providing water storage and supply for Merced County, the 5th largest agricultural county in the U.S., offers critical flood control for hundreds of downstream communities, generates clean, renewable hydropower and stabilizes the electric grid, and supports river flows during droughts, recreational opportunities, and fishery flows, including the only salmon hatchery on the San Joaquin River system. To continue operating, MID must renew its federal license through FERC. That process also requires a Clean Water Act Section 401 certification from the California State Water Board. In 2015, FERC released a Final Environmental Impact Statement, a fair and balanced environmental review that considered MID's needs while strengthening environmental protections. But while MID worked through the federal relicensing process, the State Water Board went in a different direction and adopted Phase 1 of its Bay-Delta Plan, which proposes taking a percentage of Merced River flows and sending them to the ocean—based on the possibility of adding just 450 natural salmon per year. That water would travel more than 100 miles downstream, past farms, cities, and infrastructure, to reach the Delta. Earlier this year, the State Water Board released a draft 401 certification that would effectively bypass FERC's findings, placing the burden of statewide water decisions on a single regional agency. The consequences would be devastating to my district. This is not balanced water management and puts the livelihoods of thousands, the health of our watershed, and our energy resilience at risk. The Voluntary Agreements offer a better path. Collaborations between local agencies, state and federal governments, and environmental organizations deliver real results on habitat, flow, and accountability. I will work with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle, as well as President Trump and Governor Newsom, to prevent overreach. It is crucial for the Central Valley that we find solutions reflect the complex realities on the ground. Additionally, in the final days of the Biden Administration the EPA settled a lawsuit with an environmental litigant regarding Phase 1 of Bay-Delta Water Quality Control Plan in California. This triggered ESA consultation with the Fish and Wildlife Service, along with the National Marine Fisheries Service. I look forward to hearing from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on the current status of this. Thank you.