

Headline: Impact of fish ruling on delta assessed

Publication: Fresno Bee

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Date: September 5, 2007

FRESNO -- State officials will meet today to talk about the effects of a Friday ruling by a federal judge in Fresno that ordered big cuts in Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta water pumping to protect an endangered fish.

The state contends that the ruling by U.S. District Judge Oliver W. Wanger will have dire consequences for valley farmers and Southern California residents who depend on delta water, though a closer look at the ruling shows that he included provisions to maintain necessary pumping during emergencies.

State and federal officials could pursue at least three different legal routes, should the state suffer a protracted drought or face other emergency conditions that could severely affect water supplies.

But Lester Snow, head of the California Department of Water Resources, however, said he remains skeptical of those legal options, even as he and others try to comprehend the impact of Wanger's order.

Snow said he is aware of the options but noted that one is time-consuming and the other two might help only urban areas in true peril, and not agricultural users.

Those who depend on delta water still are examining Wanger's order.

"We're somewhat in a survival mode," said Dan Nelson, executive director of the San Luis & Delta-Mendota Water Authority, which represents farmers on the San Joaquin Valley's West Side. "We're looking at any and all options."

Wanger's 30-minute oral ruling late Friday followed an eight-day hearing in which environmentalists and state and federal water officials offered several witnesses with expertise in fish biology.

The ruling stems from a 2005 lawsuit filed by the Natural Resources Defense Council, which sought to help protect the delta smelt under the federal Endangered Species Act. The 3-inch-long fish, which lives only a year, is considered an indicator of the delta's health.

At issue are the giant pumping stations that are key to the state and federal water systems, devices environmentalists say have driven the smelt to the brink of extinction.