

It's still the rainy season, but California's drought is already beginning to affect operation of the state and federal water projects that divert water from the Sacramento and San Joaquin watersheds to serve cities and farms from the Bay Area to Southern California. Yesterday the California Department of Water Resources and U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, which jointly operate the two projects, sent [this letter](#) to the State Water Resources Control Board, requesting emergency relief from the applicable water quality standards.

The water agencies want to limit releases in February in order to maintain cold water pools in the reservoirs for later release when needed by salmon, and also to protect "water supplies necessary for drought relief." It seems likely that the SWRCB will approve the request although, [because of the mandatory furloughs imposed on state employees for today](#), that won't happen until next week. Unless the rains pick up this month and next, the water agencies expect to extend their request to reduce outflows and to seek as-yet-unspecified "additional potential measures."

The water agencies say in their letter that even with the reduced February flows they will continue to comply with the [Dec. 2008 biological opinion for the Delta smelt](#). Nonetheless, as [EDF's Spreck Rosekrans points out](#), there is inevitably some tension between retaining water for later salmon releases and releasing it now, because "increased spring outflow . . . is correlated with higher abundance of a plethora of Delta fish and other ecological factors."

Sound familiar? It should. Think Klamath Basin, summer of 2001 — fish that need water at the upper end of the watershed, other fish that need it at the lower end, and farmers that need to take it out of the system. Add 24 million people counting on that water for at least some of their household supply, a complication not present in the Klamath. Shake well, and you've got a recipe for one heck of a train wreck. Stay tuned.