

## **INFORMATION ITEM**

### **Report from the Delta Watermaster about the Voluntary Diversion Reduction Program among in-Delta Riparian Water Right Claimants**

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**Summary:** As required by the Delta Reform Act, Delta Watermaster Michael George will make his quarterly report to the Council, this time discussing the recently released report on the origin and implementation of a voluntary program to significantly reduce in-Delta agricultural water diversions during the 2015 summer growing season.

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#### **Background**

The State Water Resources Control Board (SWRCB), as the State's principal water resources regulatory agency, has statutory authority to implement and enforce many types of regulatory policies and recommendations that help implement the Delta Plan's policies and recommendations. Water Code section 85320(d) directs the State's Delta Watermaster to submit regular reports to the SWRCB and to the Council on water issues.

At today's meeting, Delta Watermaster Michael George will discuss the voluntary diversion reduction program among in-Delta riparian water rights claimants. This SWRCB program sought to increase the amount of in-stream flows through the Delta by decreasing in-Delta agricultural diversions and in return provide Delta farmers assurance that their diversions would not otherwise be curtailed.

By April 2015, drought was having a severe impact statewide. The federal Central Valley Project had announced zero allocations for its water service contracts and the State Water Project anticipated being able to deliver only 20 percent of its contracted amounts. Gov. Brown ordered urban users to conserve an average 25 percent of the water used in 2013. The SWRCB restricted some of the most senior water rights diversions in the Sacramento and San Joaquin watersheds and was considering restricting the rest, including riparian water rights holders in the Delta.

As a result, farmers in the central and south Delta in May proposed a program of voluntary conservation in lieu of formal reductions ordered by the SWRCB. According to the report, "Although curtailment of water rights was a looming threat, the primary motivation for the proposal was to provide an organized way for Delta water users to relieve pressure on the State's water system and thus help ameliorate the effects of the drought – and to do so without either relinquishing or fully exercising cherished water rights claims."

#### **How the Program Worked**

Farmers within the North Delta Water Agency have a contract with the Department of Water Resources that provides assurance of both water supply and water quality. Thus, this program was of benefit mostly to farmers in the south and central Delta. The SWRCB catalogued 217 plans for voluntary diversion cutbacks covering slightly more than 180,000 acres, which is about two-thirds of the total acreage of the South and Central Delta Water Agencies.

According to the report, the cutback plans were both varied and creative, making use of many different strategies to achieve the overall 25 percent reduction. These included: fallowing land that had been planted and irrigated in 2013; changing to less water-intensive crops by moving, for example, from melons to beans or from tomatoes to wheat; and reducing irrigation frequency or using more efficient watering techniques such as drip or alternate-furrow irrigation.

The Delta Watermaster conducted field inspections throughout the growing season both to verify and learn from farmers implementing conservation plans. Such inspections were augmented by spot checks of satellite images and cross-checks with after-action reports of plan implementation. Also, farmers agreed to submit a report on the actual implementation of their plans by Nov. 1, roughly a month after the conclusion of the conservation program's four-month term.

## **Results**

According to the Delta Watermaster, the program exceeded its goal, achieving an overall reduction in reported diversions of 32 percent. Although not all individual plans met their target, significant reductions in surface water diversions were achieved with far less proportional loss of farm productivity and income.

Partly as a result, operators of the State and federal water projects observed anecdotal evidence that diversion demand within the Delta was less than operating models forecast and Delta outflow was greater than forecast. While a direct correlation is impossible, the Delta Watermaster says it is reasonable that the program deserves at least partial credit.

In addition, the Delta Watermaster reports that the program induced investment and experimentation among Delta farmers that may prove useful in response to future drought conditions and also created a positive example of addressing a common challenge without a mandate by statute, regulation, or court order.

## **Fiscal Information**

Not applicable.

## **List of Attachments**

Attachment 1: Voluntary Diversion Reduction Program among in-Delta Riparian Water Right Claimants

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