

## **Westlands surprises critics, buys land for smelt habitat**

**Irrigation district spends \$12 million to restore Delta fish**

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The nation's largest irrigation district, a consistent foe of environmentalists, has taken the unusual step of buying a \$12 million ranch in the northern Delta to restore wetlands and other habitat.

The voluntary move by the Westlands Water District could be followed by similar investments by the state's biggest water agencies to address the crumbling Delta ecosystem, a top district official said.

The rationale is simple: water deliveries to Westlands and other water districts are increasingly threatened by the decline of the region's fish, especially Delta smelt, which are protected under state and federal endangered species laws.

Providing a spawning and rearing habitat for smelt could increase the number of fish in the Delta and decrease the pressure on Delta water users.

"There is a crisis in the Delta, and the crisis is affecting a number of interests," said Tom Birmingham, Westlands' general manager.

"Our intent in acquiring the property was to benefit Delta smelt ... so the constraints on the Central Valley Project, which is our primary source of water, can be relaxed," Birmingham said.

The announcement on Thursday surprised environmentalists who blame Westlands for much of the Delta's decline. They contend that because the irrigation district was formed late in the state water game, it has greatly increased the strain on the Delta's water supplies. The needs of the Delta ecosystem and water users up and down the state appear to have taken the

Delta to a breaking point in recent years.

One environmentalist, California Sportfishing Protection Alliance executive director Bill Jennings, suggested, implausibly, that Westlands should move its farms north to reduce the pumping of water out of the Delta.

"The best thing Westlands could do to protect (fish) in the Delta is move wholesale up to the Sacramento Valley and fallow an equivalent amount of acreage that should never have experienced the plow," Jennings said.

The 3,450-acre Yolo Ranch is at the southern tip of Yolo County and is in the Yolo Bypass, an environmentally sensitive region that is flooded occasionally by managers

during high water on the Sacramento River. The area has been identified as a prime area to restore wetlands and provide spawning and rearing habitat for Delta smelt, Sacramento splittail and other fish.

"Westlands has always been perceived as an agency that has been interested in obtaining water without regard for the environment," Birmingham said. "We hope this changes that."

The purchase comes as Westlands and other water agencies are negotiating a Bay-Delta Conservation Plan which, if completed, could prevent further water supply cutbacks. In August, U.S. District Judge Oliver Wanger ruled that Delta smelt were not being protected and that the Endangered Species Act required him to impose new restrictions on water pumping.

The conservation plan is meant to replace the permitting system that Wanger found was being insufficiently enforced.

The plan, which would probably include a new method of moving water around and through the Delta, would require ecosystem restoration projects of the type Westlands is planning on the Yolo property.

In Yolo County, where the ranch is located, county officials said they were surprised by the announcement and that they would keep a close eye on how the project unfolds, including any transfer of water rights from the county to the San Joaquin Valley.

"We certainly would have liked more opportunity for communication prior to finalization of the deal," said Yolo County spokeswoman Beth Gabor.

She added that county officials welcomed what appeared to be Westlands' commitment to work with the county with respect to water rights.

Birmingham said the previous owner reported diverting as much as 15,000 acre-feet, enough for about 30,000 families, to water crops and pasture. But he said those water rights have not been analyzed and some water rights that might be associated with the property are not transferable.

"That is a potential benefit, but it is not imminent," Birmingham said.

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