



Media Release

Petition approved to capture flood flows, recharge groundwater

State Water Board approves federal request to divert more than 600,000 acre-feet of water for wildlife refuges, underground storage, and recharge

Decision helps improve aquifer conditions in Central Valley

March 8, 2023

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SACRAMENTO – To capitalize on strong flows resulting from higher-than-average snowpack, the State Water Resources Control Board [approved a petition](#) by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation to divert over 600,000 acre-feet of San Joaquin River flood waters for wildlife refuges, underground storage and recharge.

With this approval, the State Water Board has authorized nearly 790,000 acre-feet in diversions for groundwater recharge and other purposes since late December 2022 – the amount of water used by at least 1.5 million households in a single year.

“Coming off the heels of the three driest years in state history, California is taking decisive action to capture and store water for when dry conditions return,” said Governor Gavin Newsom.

Reclamation’s petition requested a change to its San Joaquin River water rights at Friant Dam to manage flood flows. The board’s approval allows for diversions from March 15 through July 30. Given the time it takes for water to reach the downstream point of diversion at Mendota Dam, the approval period will allow for floodwater capture following storms expected this weekend.

“Important opportunities remain for potential water capture during the remainder of the wet season,” said Joaquin Esquivel, chair of the board. “We are grateful for Reclamation’s coordination with us to take advantage of this moment brought on by extreme weather to replenish California’s depleted aquifers. The board is working closely with partners like Reclamation, Department of Water Resources and other groundwater agencies to enable the capture and recharge of high flows, while also ensuring that projects happen in a way that protects communities, their access to drinking water, fish and wildlife, and water rights holders.”



CALIFORNIA ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

STATE WATER RESOURCES CONTROL BOARD

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By submitting its petition, Reclamation helped the board make the scale of this potential recharge possible by avoiding the need for numerous individual approvals.

“We appreciate this decision by the State Water Board, which will allow us to take advantage of these expected flood flows for beneficial use,” said Ernest Conant, regional director of Reclamation's California-Great Basin Region. “With this year's record-breaking snowpack in the San Joaquin River Basin, Reclamation is diligently working to execute temporary water service contracts to ensure the best management of the projected large, unstorable flood flows.”

Most groundwater recharge occurs naturally during rain and flood events, when stormwater percolates through deeper layers of soil and into basins. Recent winter storms have helped snowpack and reservoirs, but basins recover more slowly. With groundwater accounting for up to 60% of California's water supply in dry years, Gov. Gavin Newsom's [Water Supply Strategy](#) seeks to expand replenishment of these basins – which have the ability to store eight to 12 times more water than the state's surface water reservoirs - by 500,000 acre-feet annually.

Reclamation's water rights allow it to store and divert water at Friant Dam primarily for municipal, domestic, irrigation and stock watering uses. That water is sent to Central Valley Project water contractors either south through the Friant-Kern Canal or north through the Madera Canal. Reclamation also releases water into the San Joaquin River for flood control, for riparian water right holders downstream of the dam, and for fish and wildlife enhancement purposes pursuant to the requirements of the [San Joaquin River Restoration Program](#).

The approved order helps maintain restoration flows for fish while the groundwater recharge foreseen in the petition occurs, requiring that at least 300 cubic feet per second are bypassed to the San Joaquin River before additional diversions are permitted.

The State Water Board's mission is to preserve, enhance and restore the quality of California's water resources and drinking water for the protection of the environment, public health and all beneficial uses, and to ensure proper water resource allocation for present and future generations.