

**OPENING STATEMENT BY BOYD GIBBONS
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**BEFORE THE STATE WATER RESOURCES CONTROL BOARD
HEARING ON INTERIM STANDARDS FOR THE BAY-DELTA ESTUARY
June 22, 1992
Sacramento, California**

A few floors above my office in Sacramento is the control center for the movement of water from the Sierra Nevada to the lawns of San Diego, with considerable detours to orchards and fields of the Central Valley. Through dams, and penstocks, river channels, canals, pumps, aqueducts, siphons and more pumps, this water is moved from one end of the state to the other. Like the federal Central Valley Project, the State Water Project is in many ways a tribute to the ingenuity of engineering that has manipulated so much water in this way for the benefit of so many Californians.

But these and other water projects have not come without great cost to our society in the degraded ecosystems to which their plumbing has contributed, most notably the Bay-Delta Estuary. In its natural state--before the water projects rearranged its hydraulics to pump water south--this estuary was among the world's richest aquatic ecosystems, where the entire drainage of the Great Central Valley mixed with the tides before flowing into the Pacific. So fertile was the Bay-Delta Estuary that shortly after some striped bass were introduced here in 1879 from New Jersey, the bass population literally exploded. That population is now imploding, declining by more than 70% despite this Board's standards (D-1485) and our efforts over the last ten years to artificially raise and plant 11 million stripers. To protect the winter-run salmon, I recently suspended planting stripers in the Delta, because it was simply throwing good fish into bad waters.

In his water policy statement, the Governor described the Delta as broken and urged this Board's completion of interim standards by the end of the year to begin restoring the estuary. I realize that the Board attempted to do so through D-1379 and D-1485, but the species we tried to protect then are still dwindling in numbers, and the list of species in trouble keeps getting longer.

Not only are the striped bass in decline, but so are a number of fish species dependent on the estuary for food, nursery habitat, and as a corridor for migration. The winter-run Chinook salmon, which had a healthy population of nearly 200,000 before Shasta Dam was built, are down to so few fish that they are listed by the federal government as threatened and by California as endangered. Last March at the pumps too many of their smolts were lost. The spring-run Chinook, once the dominant salmon of California before being nearly eradicated by the construction of Friant Dam and other dams on the tributaries of the San Joaquin, are but a remnant in a few creeks. Starry flounder and Bay shrimp are going downhill, and private groups are considering listings for the spring-run salmon, longfin smelt, green sturgeon, and splittail minnow. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has proposed listing the Delta smelt.

The condition of all these species describes the condition of their habitat, the Bay-Delta Estuary. In the eleventh hour, we find ourselves listing species after species as threatened or endangered. If we ignore what this evidence is telling us, we will find ourselves singing a requiem to a dying Delta.

The time for palliatives is past. We must begin restoring to health this aquatic ecosystem.

The current drought has exacerbated this widespread depletion in species and estuarine habitat. These species have evolved to adapt to the wide swings between drought and flood that define this part of the country, but not in so altered an environment. This drought has exposed the limits of our engineering and the misplacement of the burden of proof. In the past, water projects have been built with insufficient information and concern about their effects on the environment. These were engineering solutions for the redistribution of water, with dramatic consequences in the estuary. In rearranging the natural flows in the Delta by drawing water into the pumps and down the aqueducts, we have moved water uphill, reversing the flow of the San Joaquin, disorienting and losing the fish.

The natural world can be surprisingly resilient, but ecosystems do have limits to their manipulation. And the Bay-Delta Estuary has reached those limits. The damaging consequences of water development in the estuary are largely associated with:

- inadequate fresh water flows into and through the estuary to the ocean
- problems with poor distribution of flows within the Delta because of the pumps in the southern Delta
- fish directly lost at the pumps and in all other water diversions

The Department's experts will document these effects and present recommendations for all three categories.

I am sympathetic to the difficulties facing this Board at reconciling the various demands for water--for irrigating crops, running industry, satisfying the thirst of an expanding population of Californians--while protecting the public trust resources which are so rapidly dwindling.

We have to address both the short term--the subject of these hearings--and eventually the long term. The Governor has called for a preventive, ecosystem approach to protect and restore fish and wildlife and their aquatic habitats in the long term.

As the existing plumbing will require substantial modification to prevent water deliveries from further damaging fish and their habitat, we will be addressing all options in the broader planning effort ordered by the Governor to fix the Delta.

For the interim, the Board must set standards for the estuary to reverse the decline in fish and wildlife populations and to begin their restoration. Our technical data shows that precipitous declines began in the early 1970s, with the onset of heavy pumping from the Delta. The Board will have to decide whether this or some other period represents an appropriate benchmark against which to measure the recovery of the fish populations.

The Department's experts are exploring a set of integrated recommendations with respect to a variety of anadromous and estuarine species. These include limits on exports, minimum flows in the Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers, minimum flows at Jersey Point, Rio Vista, and Chipps Island, operation of the Delta Cross Channel and a barrier at the head of Old River, measures in the Board's 1991 Salinity Control Plan, and operational criteria for the Tracy and Skinner fish screens. We recognize that these recommendations cannot be met by the state and federal water projects alone, but will require modifications of other projects and diverters.

We are mindful that what we do for the estuary may complicate management upstream. Consequently, the Department will present estimates of minimum flows required for each principal upstream tributary and requirements for carryover storage.

The protection of public trust resources of the estuary will likely conflict with what others will request of this Board for the delivery of water. It is time that the Board and all Californians recognize this dilemma: given the existing system, there is not enough water to protect all beneficial uses in all years.

As trustees for the living creatures who have no voice in our affairs, the Department of Fish and Game is asking the Board to act boldly to arrest and reverse the decline in this great estuarine ecosystem. California is blessed with riches of natural beauty and biological diversity that benefit our entire society. That is the public trust--and we should protect it.

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