

FAQs about Unimpaired Flows

What are unimpaired flows and why do they matter?

The State Water Resources Control Board defines unimpaired flows as "the river flow that would occur if all runoff from the watershed remained in the river, without storage or diversion." There haven't been truly unimpaired flows since the first reservoirs were constructed 100 years ago. Today, under a federal flow criteria called the OCAP Biological Opinion, unimpaired flows on the Stanislaus River are about 30% from January to June. The state plan appears to be seeking an increase to at least 40–50%. With the current water rights of the Oakdale and South San Joaquin irrigation districts, there would be no water for storage or other basin uses and less water for agriculture in order to make up for the over commitment to unimpaired flows.

Are the Stanislaus, Tuolumne and Merced rivers the only ones affected in the state? Why?

At the present time, the answer is "Yes." The San Joaquin River and its tributaries are the state's Phase I target of its Water Quality Control plan for the Delta. Its Phase 2 target is the Sacramento River. While the state has not directly acknowledged that increasing unimpaired flows is related to Governor Jerry Brown's twin tunnels project, for those who are impacted, it's hard to think they aren't linked. The more water diverted from the Stanislaus, Tuolumne and Merced rivers into the Delta allows more water from the Sacramento River to feed the tunnels and be sent south.

How much does water volume affect fish populations?

There is no peer-reviewed scientific journal or research that shows more water equals more fish. None. The use of pulse flows similarly show no scientific benefit to improve salmon and rainbow trout/steelhead populations. Local scientists say habitat restoration and predation control are far more effective ways to increase the number of fish. An estimated 95% of young salmon and steelhead are eaten before they ever reach the Delta; that has nothing to do with increased water flow.

What could be the impact on agriculture?

Agriculture in San Joaquin, Stanislaus and Merced counties is worth more than \$8.5 billion annually, with those dollars circulating many more times. The state's plan could divert more than 350,000 acre-feet of water away from agriculture. One estimate suggests that more than 100,000 acres would be fallowed; thousands of jobs in farming, trucking, food processing and related industries would be lost; and tens of millions of dollars would be sucked out of the local economy.

How might farmers make up for the lost water?

If irrigation districts are forced to dramatically cut surface deliveries, many farmers will have no choice but to pump more groundwater to keep crops alive. That would happen at the same time the state is directing counties to enact sweeping policies to sustainably manage critical groundwater supplies.

What are the potential impacts of unimpaired flows to our basin?

What unimpaired flows do is cause more water to leave the basin. More water leaving the basin each year means less water going into storage to keep the dams and reservoirs full. Less water going to storage in reservoirs means less water in those facilities when droughts occur. Less water available during droughts means these facilities would be drained more often to meet water shortages. Under the state's plan, it's estimated New Melones would be "empty" one out of every five years.

What does the state water board say about local concerns?

It calls the potential economic and social impacts "significant but unavoidable." Yet the water board has not held any meetings in this region to explain its plan. Many civic leaders and others are frustrated that there appears to be nothing they can say or do to influence the decision. They feel the burden of solving the Delta's problems — clearly, a statewide issue — is falling disproportionately on those who live in the Northern San Joaquin Valley.