

Where Does the Water Go?

New Melones Reservoir is the fourth-largest in the state. It has a capacity of 2.4 million acre-feet of water, but the four-year drought has dramatically reduced its level.

The Stanislaus River watershed is the driest it's ever been. January 2015 was the driest January since record keeping began and followed 2014, which was the fourth driest year on record.

The historic average inflow from the Stanislaus River into New Melones is 1.05 million acre-feet. However, since 1985, the average inflow has dropped to 996,000 acre-feet. In 2015, inflow is projected to be about 248,000 acre-feet.

In 2009, the National Marine Fisheries Service issued a Biological Opinion about water conditions and fish in the Stanislaus River. It requires a certain amount of water to be released throughout the year from New Melones in what are known as pulse flows to help salmon and steelhead trout. In wet years, more water is released; in dry years, less.

Since 2011, more than 500,000 acre-feet of extra water that could have been stored behind the dam instead has been sent downriver for fish — with no scientific proof it has helped increase fish populations.

At the end of 2015, New Melones is expected to hold less than 250,000 acre-feet. If runoff exceeds average by 100,000 acre-feet a year, it would take 20 years for the lake to completely refill again.

Average runoff into New Melones Reservoir is 1.05 million acre-feet – most of which is promised before it ever arrives. Long-term storage only happens in extremely wet years. Today, reservoir demand far exceeds supply because of the four-year California drought and a federal Biological Opinion that requires excessive water releases for salmon and steelhead trout. The likelihood the reservoir can ever completely refill is diminished by the same formula that mandates more water for fish. The consequences potentially are devastating for agricultural and domestic customers as well as those who enjoy the reservoir and river for recreation.

