

WINNEMEM WINTU TRIBE



NORTH
COAST
RIVERS
ALLIANCE

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GROUPS SUE TO BLOCK GIANT BACKROOM WATER DEAL

Three months after the State Senator Steinberg's so-called "historic" delta protection legislation was approved the state's agribusiness industry is quietly securing secret state and federal sign offs to authorize water exporters to damage the Sacramento San Joaquin Delta for decades to come. North Coast Rivers Alliance and three other groups filed suit today to guarantee the public gets full public disclosure and environmental review of those water contract decisions.

A couple days before Christmas when Westlands Water District thought no one would notice the giant district issued a three paragraph notice that quietly declared the renewal of six water export contracts valid and harmless to the Delta and environment. The Steinberg state legislation was supposed to protect the Delta, but it didn't; actually it "woke up" fishermen's and conservation groups to the fact that these giant water export contracts were being quietly renewed without any public review or disclosure. Incredibly, Westlands had announced that the renewal of over a million acre feet of Northern California water export wouldn't require any environmental disclosure of the impacts of those contracts on Delta fish and wildlife. This occurred at the very time numerous federal and state agencies have become increasingly concerned about the harm these export contracts were having on the largest wetland habitat in the western United States.

"With little or no review Westlands Water District wants the federal government to sign off on these destructive water exports," stated Steve Evans Conservation Director for Friends of the River. "They are slipping this by trying to avoid responsibility for reducing damage to the Delta."

"These massive commitments of water to less than 600 corporate agricultural users are a direct threat to the Delta and to the Trinity River, which is the source of the water," declared Frank Egger, President North Coast Rivers Alliance. "We need to be vigilant and make sure that the fortunes of Westlands corporate famers are not made at the expense of the North Coast and California's salmon fishing industry."

"The Winnemem Wintu, a traditional people of California, see the folly of the government's plans relative to the Delta and pray for people of reason to wake up and help protect the estuary from over pumping and the damage these plans will wreak upon the water and resources of this state," stated Mark Franco, Headman Winnemem Wintu Tribe. "Water is the lifeblood of our people and we stand

ready to protect it with our colleagues across California's social justice movement. This rash plan will only serve a few people and will impact the rights of our future generations."

Westlands Water District is trying to lock up over a million acre feet of water a year in exports from the Sacramento San Joaquin Delta. The federal agricultural contracts represent almost three times the Delta water that goes to southern California urban areas receive under state contracts. The water is diverted from the Trinity River into the Sacramento River, and then exported from the Delta. Westlands seeks to avoid any public disclosure or environmental review of the impacts to the Delta, Sacramento, San Joaquin, American and Trinity Rivers was provided. Typically this environmental analysis must be done by independent scientists that take into account public disclosure of all the environmental impacts, but in this case the district approved their own documents and, no surprise, concluded there was no environmental impact involved with over a million acre feet of Delta water exports. Irrigation of these lands on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley has been linked to selenium caused bird deaths and deformities at the now closed Kesterson National Wildlife Refuge.

"Massive exports that irrigate these selenium lands move pollution down slope to the San Joaquin River and the Delta," stated Felix Smith spokesperson for Save the American River Association. "Water supplies from the American and Sacramento Rivers are going to be left on the hook to dilute the pollution. It won't work. It could kill migratory birds and fish in the Delta just as they were killed at Kesterson National Wildlife Refuge."

Today, North Coast Rivers Alliance, Friends of the River, Save the American River and the Winnemem Wintu Tribe filed suit in Fresno Superior Court demanding full public disclosure of the impacts of Westlands Water District's exaggerated water export contract renewals with the Bureau of Reclamation. The groups filing the lawsuit want full disclosure under the California Environmental Quality Act of the pollution and potential environmental harm from locking in such massive water exports from the Delta estuary which provides migration corridors for two-thirds of the state's salmon and nearly half of the waterfowl and shorebirds along the Pacific Flyway

"All scientists agree that the Delta is now on the brink of ecologic collapse. Renewing these contracts for one-fifth of the Delta's exports without required environmental review is like nailing your gas pedal to the floor as you approach a hairpin turn. This suit asks the Court to slam on the brakes before Westlands drives the Delta over the cliff," commented Stephan Volker, attorney for the plaintiffs.

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