

Recovery of Delta Smelt - Department of the Fish and Game

Dear Ms. Anthony

The Governor has asked me to respond to your recent letter regarding the effects of the additional pressure on the Delta smelt population by the release of salmon directly into the Delta smelt habitat. First of all, let me commend you on your concern for the ecological problems facing the recovery of our fisheries resources in the State of California. We are committed to the belief that the most effective strategy for managing species which are potentially endangered is to manage their entire ecosystem.

The problem facing the recovery of the Delta smelt are numerous although salmon predation of Delta smelt does not appear to be a significant problem. Indeed, both the Department of Fish and Game and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are releasing large numbers of young salmon into the Sacramento River and at Benicia. In fact, last year, approximately 23 million fry and smolts were released into the Sacramento River. Most of these fish were fall, late fall, and spring-run Chinook, but a small percent were the endangered winter-run Chinook. This may appear to be a large number of fish that could possibly prey on Delta smelt, but when young salmon are migrating out of the Estuary they are feeding on much smaller organism such as zooplankton. Older juveniles which are released at Benicia migrate quite rapidly out to sea. Approximately 9 million salmon were released at Benicia last year which is below the normal range of Delta smelt which concentrate in the mixing zone between fresh and salt water. Historically, this mixing zone has been located in Suisun Bay, but in recent years has been located in the lower Sacramento River below Rio Vista due to increased water diversions and the drought. The actual reason why the salmon are released at Benicia is to increase the survival of the young salmon migrating out of the Estuary. Adult salmon feed almost exclusively in the ocean and when migrating upstream seldom feed.

Both Delta smelt and Chinook salmon are native to the Sacramento-San Joaquin Estuary and have coexisted for many thousands of years before man dramatically altered the Estuary. The most dramatic alteration has been the large amount of water that has been diverted from the Delta. We are concentrating our scientific investigation on the direct and indirect impacts that these diversions have on the Delta smelt as well as the other fish species present in the Estuary. However, we also continue to research how fish species interact with each other in this altered environment.

Balancing the increasing water demands brought about by the State's increasing human population with the needs of our fish and wildlife has become an ever-increasing challenge. We are committed to doing our best to meet the challenge.

Sincerely,

Boyd Gibbons

Director

Cc: Governor's Office