

Calif. water system stretched to limit, officials say



An arm of Lake Oroville on June 22 is nearly depleted. Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Dale Kasler, Sacramento Bee

A plan to save endangered fish has pushed California's fragile water system almost to the breaking point, putting additional strain on farmers while drawing down reservoirs at Folsom and Oroville to historically low levels.

At an informal hearing Wednesday of the State Water Resources Control Board, federal and state regulators acknowledged they're struggling to hold California's water infrastructure together amid dwindling supplies and increasing anger from farmers, legislators and others.

With the drought in its fourth year, officials said the next few weeks could prove crucial – not only for endangered fish, but also for farmers throughout California who have planted crops based on earlier expectations of more generous water supplies.

“In my business, we get no do-overs,” said John Azevedo, a San Joaquin Valley farmer who is president of the Patterson Irrigation District. “I can’t unplant my crops.”

He and others, joined by state legislators, urged the water board to make more water available for agriculture this year, saying billions of dollars worth of crops in the ground are in danger. Environmentalists countered by saying several endangered fish species could go extinct if more water isn’t earmarked for them.

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