



# MID strongly opposes State's Bay Delta water grab

*District continues to advocate common-sense alternative Merced River S.A.F.E. Plan*

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The Merced Irrigation District strongly condemned the revised, final Bay Delta water plan released today, calling it an irresponsible water grab that would place undue harm on already significantly disadvantaged communities.

“The District has maintained for years that simply diverting senior water rights away from our community for the benefit of others solves nothing. It devastates one of the most disadvantaged regions of the state and does nothing to benefit salmon or other wildlife,” said MID General Manager John Sweigard.

MID has continued to advocate its proposed alternative to the state's water grab: The [Merced River S.A.F.E. Plan](#) (Salmon, Agriculture, Flows and Environment). The plan represents a comprehensive alternative proposal aimed directly at supporting sustainable agriculture, fisheries and the environment. The S.A.F.E. Plan would enhance environmental conditions while still providing protection and certainty to water supply and water quality in eastern Merced County. The S.A.F.E. Plan would put decades of river science – and tens of millions of dollars – into immediate action.

At specific issue is the State Water Resources Control Board's update to the Bay Delta Water Quality Control Plan. In September 2016, the State Water Board released a second draft to the long-anticipated Bay Delta Water Quality Control Plan Update, or SED. The Water Board received thousands of pages of comments from interested parties across the state, including MID, and said that it would review and revise its plan based on those comments. After almost 2 years, the State Water Board today released its revised, and apparently now final, SED.

The plan still calls for significant diversions of Merced River water away from eastern Merced County and sends it to the San Francisco Bay Delta for the purported benefit of salmon and water quality in the Delta. This water would normally be stored in MID's Lake McClure for later use in eastern Merced County, environmental flows, and drought flows on the Merced River.

MID owns and operates Lake McClure. The District is not connected to the state or federal water projects like most other water agencies and communities in California – and does not have the ability to acquire supplemental water from other areas of the state. The State's desire to unnecessarily take surface water from the Merced area will have devastating impacts on the agricultural economy of Merced County. It will also further distress already over-drafted local groundwater supplies and harm water quality. The groundwater is used by all cities and rural residents.

The State Water Board's SED will cost the local economy in the Merced area more than \$230 million in economic activity and nearly 1,000 lost jobs. At the same time, this water grab will do nothing to improve conditions or salmon populations in the Delta or elsewhere: the State Water Board's initial assessment purported that 1,200 salmon per year would be saved. This new document claims the State does not know if it will result in more salmon.

The loss of local water supply is especially crucial as the region seeks to comply with the state's new Sustainable Groundwater Management Act. The water in Lake McClure provides both a surface-water supply for agriculture, as well as helps replenish the aquifer in Eastern Merced County used by all urban residents.

Over the years, MID has spent tens of millions of dollars developing the most intense and in-depth scientific research on the Merced River that exists – research that has been inexplicably ignored by the State Water Board. MID has studied flows, temperatures, biological resources, habitats, and more.

The District has continued to advocate putting this research into immediate and direct action through implementation of the [Merced River S.A.F.E. Plan](#). Under the S.A.F.E. Plan:

**FLOWS** – Flows on the Merced River would IMMEDIATELY increase over current obligations. However, the increased flows would rely on sound science and be coupled with eco-system improvements. Flow releases would be made at times proven to benefit migratory salmon. Unlike the State's Bay Delta Plan, the S.A.F.E. Plan flow releases would occur in coordination with multiple other efforts to support salmon, including habitat restoration and predation management.

**HABITAT RESTORATION** – More than 5 miles of riparian and salmon-rearing habitat would be restored along the Merced River upstream of the community of Snelling. This habitat was altered generations ago by large-scale aggressive hydraulic dredge mining, an activity that was welcomed by the State at the time, before MID was formed. A technical advisory committee, comprised of MID and federal and state

agencies, would oversee the comprehensive river restoration and enhancement, and coordinate this work with other ongoing restoration projects.

**INCREASED SALMON HATCHERY PRODUCTION** — MID, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, and other interested agencies would develop and implement a plan to modernize and expand the existing Merced River Salmon Hatchery, increasing salmon production, survival and returns of spring run Chinook salmon.

**PREDATION MANAGEMENT** – Under the S.A.F.E. Plan, a technical advisory committee, comprised of MID and federal and state agencies, would oversee a comprehensive Merced River Salmonid Predator Management Plan. Key elements would include manually removing non-native predator fish from the river. Predator fish spawning and rearing areas would be filled in, many of which occur in isolated, off-channel ponds.

MID had been engaged for years, with multiple parties including the state and environmental groups, seeking to find a compromise solution to benefit all interests while protecting the District's water rights and the eastern Merced County water supply. The District abandoned negotiations when it became clear that there was no compromise being seriously considered – only the hostile water grab from the community of Merced.

MID's Sweigard said that the District will continue to carefully vet the complete document from the State Water Board and determine the District's next course of action.

"We have reached a critical point. Everything – and anything – is on the table at this point to protect our community's senior water rights," said Sweigard.

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