



# SIERRA CLUB

## TEHIPITE CHAPTER

### SACRAMENTO NEWS & REVIEW

JANUARY 13, 2025

## Falsely blaming the LA wildfires on Delta protection and the imperiled smelt is distorting the picture of water in California



Pacific Palisades after a huge wildfire raged through the Los Angeles community (photo credit: Jeffrey St. Clair)

### President-elect Trump is spreading a sham narrative to the country, which is being parroted by allies, about what is happening in the Golden State's rivers and reservoirs

By Dan Bacher (reprinted with permission)

As apocalyptic scenes emerged from the climate change-induced fires raging across the Pacific Palisades, Pasadena and other neighborhoods in Los Angeles, President Donald Trump blasted California Governor Gavin Newsom on Truth Social for not signing a “water declaration” that would provide more water for Californians. As he has done many times before, Trump **blamed it all on the Delta smelt**, though in reality this highly threatened fish has nothing to do with wildfires. An initial estimate of the cost of the LA fires is between \$52 billion and \$57 billion, making it the most expensive fire event in history, according to AccuWeather Inc.

Trump claimed Newsom “refused to sign the water restoration declaration put before him that would have allowed millions of gallons of water, from excess rain and snow melt from the North, to flow daily into many parts of California, including the areas that are currently burning in a virtually apocalyptic way. He wanted to protect an essentially worthless fish called a smelt, but didn’t care about the people of California.”

**The problem is that the “water restoration” declaration cited by Trump does not exist.** It is one of four complete falsehoods in Trump’s statement. Newsom’s office sent the following statement to ABC10: “There is no such document as the water restoration declaration — that is pure fiction. The Governor is focused on protecting people, not playing politics, and making sure firefighters have all the resources they need.”

The second falsehood in Trump’s statement is that the Delta smelt is “an essentially worthless fish.” **The Delta smelt is a key indicator species of**

the health of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, the largest estuary on the West Coast of the Americas. This 2- to 3-inch fish that smells like a cucumber is found only in the Delta. **It was once the most abundant fish in the Delta, but now is functionally extinct** due to massive water exports to agribusiness and other factors, including invasive species, toxics and pollution.

The third falsehood Trump has been spreading is that water from Northern California hasn’t been allowed to “flow daily into many parts of California,” including Southern California. In fact, **major South Coast reservoirs supplied by Delta water are currently anywhere from 77% to 85% of capacity**, according to California Department of Resources data.

The fourth falsehood is Trump’s claim that Newsom is denying Californians water in order to protect the smelt. In fact, **the state and federal governments have failed to protect the state and federal Endangered Species Act salmon** over the past three decades, as both Democratic and Republican governors preferred to ship vast quantities of Delta water to corporate agribusiness and Southern California water agencies.

### Delta smelt is functionally extinct in the wild

Zero smelt have been caught over the past six years in the California Department of Fish and Wildlife’s Midwater Trawl Survey, despite the stocking of thousands of hatchery-raised smelt in the Delta by state and federal agencies for the past three years. In the summer of 2024, a weekly survey by the US Fish and Wildlife Service targeting Delta smelt caught **only one smelt**.

Meanwhile, the other species collected in the survey — striped bass, longfin smelt, Sacramento splittail and threadfin shad — continue their dramatic decline since 1967 when the State Water Project went into effect. The collapse of Delta smelt and other pelagic fish populations is part of a larger ecosystem decline that includes Central Valley salmon populations.

### Salmon populations have collapsed because of massive water diversions to agribusiness

The Sacramento River fall-run Chinook salmon has been the driver of West Coast ocean salmon fisheries for decades. However, record low returns of salmon to Coleman National Fish Hatchery have resulted in the fishery disaster. Salmon fishing on California ocean and river waters was closed in 2023 and 2024 due to the collapse of Sacramento River and Klamath River salmon populations.

Meanwhile, endangered Chinook salmon populations are moving closer and closer to extinction. Sacramento River winter Chinook in 2023 were estimated to be only 2,447 adults and 54 jacks, according to the Pacific Fishery Management Council. Critics say there is no doubt that the State Water Project and Central Valley Project, which they call the Delta “death pumps,” have exported so much water to Big Ag oligarchs that they’ve been the biggest killers of salmon, steelhead, Sacramento splittail and other fish species in California for decades.

Meanwhile, Restore the Delta is responding to the misinformation spread by Trump and his allies in corporate agribusiness. “For the official record, reservoirs in Los Angeles are full. The challenges in combating these fires arise from extreme winds, arid brush conditions, and regional infrastructure constraints in Southern California — not water scarcity or environmental protections.”

The Tehipite Chapter of the Sierra Club and R. W. Kerrigan present:

Thursday, February 20 at 7:00 PM

Woodward Park Library, 944 E Perrin, Fresno

### (Very) Stormy Weather: From the Great Flood of 1862 to Forecasts for the 21st Century

This talk will review the history of multiple ‘megastorm’ events here over the past 2000 years, the science behind them, the impacts they have on environments, both natural and constructed, and on people, communities, systems, and regions. Kerrigan will also address how individuals, families, communities, and society can begin to prepare to cope with future extreme storm events.

Free and open to the general public.

R. W. Kerrigan had public safety responsibilities in California for 8 years, followed by 45 years as a researcher and educator in the life sciences. Personal experience of recent severe weather events and their consequences led to a deep dive into what history and science tell us about extreme storms and floods in the West. Public safety remains a major focus of his interests. This is his third book.

Megastorms,  
California,  
and You

Navigating Extreme  
West Coast Weather

R. W. Kerrigan