

Fish groups say water strategy not enough

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Last week, California Governor Newsom released his Water Supply Strategy, which is intended to guide and improve the state's ability to adapt to a hotter, drier future. Leading cold-water conservation groups California Trout (CalTrout) and Trout Unlimited (TU) applauded the governor's action but said the strategy must also articulate how it will address the worsening state of freshwater ecosystems, native fish populations, and recreational and commercial fisheries.

The strategy lays out a number of proposed actions to increase water supply, including developing new supplies, expanding storage capacity, reducing demand and improving forecasting, data, and management, including water rights modernization. Missing are actions to restore and protect streams and water vital for salmon, steelhead and trout.

"While we applaud and agree with the governor's focus on solving California's aging water storage infrastructure problems, he left out a critical piece of nuance," said Redgie Collins, CalTrout's legal and policy director.

“Many of California’s 1,400 dams are obsolete, meaning they no longer safely deliver water storage, flood control or energy production. Many of these aging dams kill fish, impair water quality and destroy recreational opportunities. If the state truly wants improve its water infrastructure, it must include the removal of facilities as well. Old obsolete dams are located on some of our best remaining salmon streams, including the Eel River, Battle Creek, and the Klamath River, which are also water sources for many cultures, communities and economies.

“While we need to ensure that our state has adequate water storage capacity, we also must seize the opportunity to restore those rivers that will most benefit people, fish and wildlife.”

Climate impacts, coupled with human water demand and management and legacy land use practices, have devastated California’s salmon and steelhead populations. Many of these populations are listed under the California and federal Endangered Species Acts due to drastic declines in recent decades.

Some of the actions outlined in the strategy have the potential to improve habitat conditions for native fish if implemented in the right manner. For example, groundwater recharge efforts could open opportunities for nature-based solutions that also restore and improve important fish habitat like floodplains and reconnect wetlands.

“We agree that the effects of climate change on the state’s water supplies are severe,” said Matt Clifford, staff attorney for TU’s California Water Project. “More severe dry years, hotter temperatures, more evaporation, and less runoff all add up to less flow in the rivers and streams that support salmon and steelhead. This plan has a lot to say about how to make more water available for people, but it needs to say much more about how we will integrate those actions with others to better protect and enhance the streamflows that our native cold-water fish require. There are ways to do both, and it’s crucial that they be described in the state’s plans.”