

RECLAMATION

Managing Water in the West

Draft FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Westlands Water District Groundwater Warren Act Contract

FONSI-15-001



U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Reclamation

March 2015

Mission Statements

The mission of the Department of the Interior is to protect and manage the Nation's natural resources and cultural heritage; provide scientific and other information about those resources; and honor its trust responsibilities or special commitments to American Indians, Alaska Natives, and affiliated island communities.

The mission of the Bureau of Reclamation is to manage, develop, and protect water and related resources in an environmentally and economically sound manner in the interest of the American public.

BUREAU OF RECLAMATION
South-Central California Area Office, Fresno, California

FONSI-15-001

Westlands Water District Groundwater
Warren Act Contract

Prepared by: Ben Lawrence
Natural Resources Specialist

Date

Concurred by: Shauna McDonald
Biologist

Date

Concurred by: Rain L. Emerson
Supervisory Natural Resources Specialist

Date

Approved by: Michael Jackson, P.E.
Area Manager

Date

Introduction

In accordance with section 102(2)(c) of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, as amended, the South-Central California Area Office of the Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation), has determined that an environmental impact statement is not required for issuance of a Warren Act Contract to Westlands Water District. This Finding of No Significant Impact is supported by Reclamation's Environmental Assessment (EA)-15-001, *Westlands Water District Groundwater Warren Act Contract*, which is hereby incorporated by reference.

Proposed Action

Reclamation proposes to enter into a five-year Warren Act Contract with Westlands Water District. Under the terms of the contract, Westlands Water District would introduce up to 30,000 acre-feet per year (AF/y) of non-Central Valley Project (CVP) water into the San Luis Canal, in years in which Westlands Water District's CVP allocation is 20% or less. The period of introduction would be between April 1 and August 31 of a given year. However, if it is not possible to begin conveyance by April 1, 2015, the conveyance period for this year would be shifted by one month, to between May 1 and September 30. All subsequent years would use the April 1 to August 31 window.

The source of the non-CVP water would be pumped groundwater from deep groundwater wells within Westlands Water District, as well as other sources of non-CVP water by way of the Mendota Pool. Potential groundwater sources and proposed discharge locations are listed and shown graphically in EA 15-001. The amount of water from each source would vary, but the total quantity introduced under the Proposed Action would not exceed a combined volume of 30,000 AF in a given year. Prior to introduction, all wells would be tested to demonstrate compliance with then-current water quality standards for conveyance of non-Project water in the San Luis Canal. Water coming from the Mendota Pool would be tested at the laterals discharging to the San Luis Canal.

Non-CVP water introduced into the San Luis Canal would either be directly delivered to agricultural users located downstream of the points of introduction, or operationally exchanged with Reclamation for a like amount, less conveyance losses, of Westlands Water District's available water supplies in San Luis Reservoir. Exchanged water would either be delivered to agricultural users located upstream of the points of introduction in Westlands Water District or stored in San Luis Reservoir as non-CVP water for later delivery to Westlands Water District via the San Luis Canal.

Introduction of Westland Water District's non-CVP water and storage of the exchanged water would be scheduled annually with Reclamation and would be subject to excess capacity, operational constraints, and environmental requirements, as applicable. No Project Use Power would be used for the Proposed Action.

It is Westlands Water District's intention to use the water in the same year in which it is introduced to federal facilities. However, if Westlands Water District is unable to make use of water introduced into the facilities within the designated window, it may be necessary to carry the water over until it can be put to productive use.

No new facilities or modifications to the San Luis Canal would be authorized. However, some of the existing discharge facilities have licenses which have expired, will expire soon, or could not be identified. Reclamation proposes to issue a combined 25-year authorization for all discharge points involved in the Proposed Action.

Environmental Commitments

Westlands WD shall implement the environmental protection measures listed in Table 2-2 of EA-15-001 to reduce environmental consequences associated with the Proposed Action. Environmental consequences for resource areas assume the measures specified would be fully implemented.

Findings

Reclamation's finding that implementation of the Proposed Action will result in no significant impact to the quality of the human environment is supported by the following findings:

Resources Eliminated from Detailed Analysis

As described in Section 3.1 of EA-15-001, Reclamation analyzed the affected environment and determined that the Proposed Action does not have the potential to cause direct, indirect, or cumulative adverse effects to the following resources: cultural resources, Indian Sacred Sites, Indian Trust Assets, air quality or global climate.

Water Resources

Surface Water

The Proposed Action would allow groundwater and other non-CVP water to be conveyed and/or stored in CVP facilities when excess capacity is available. The Proposed Action would not interfere with the normal operations of the San Luis Canal (as it would be scheduled prior to introduction), nor would it impede any State Water Project (SWP) or CVP obligations to deliver water to other contractors or to fish and wildlife habitat.

In 2014, in an action similar to the Proposed Action, Westlands Water District was given authorization to pump up to 30,000 AF of groundwater from many of the same wells, for conveyance with SWP approval in joint facilities. Total dissolved solids values reported for water from the wells at that time ranged from 530 to 1180 mg/L. This is expected to be representative of the groundwater pumped and conveyed under the Proposed Action. Water in each well would be required to meet then-current water quality standards prior to approval for introduction into the San Luis Canal. If a well to be used for pumping water into the San Luis Canal does not meet standards, no water would be accepted from that source until water quality improves sufficient to meet the requirements.

Some groundwater wells included in the Proposed Action are located in areas known to be impacted by historic drainage. However, these wells are all screened below the Corcoran Clay layer which separates the shallow and deep aquifers. Therefore, the water pumped from these wells would not come from the layers which are drainage-impaired. The groundwater pumped and conveyed under the Proposed Action would also not be used on land known to be drainage-impaired, and therefore would not mobilize contaminants present in those areas.

Groundwater

The Proposed Action could involve the pumping of up to 30,000 AF/y of groundwater at various locations within the district, for conveyance in federal facilities, during years in which their CVP allocation is 20% or less. The water involved in the Proposed Action is within the range of historical pumping during the irrigation season, and would be pumped regardless of whether Reclamation allowed its conveyance in federal facilities. The Proposed Action only allows Westlands Water District's growers to convey the water to the areas of the district with greatest need.

Westlands Water District shall monitor and report groundwater levels to Reclamation as part of their water quality sampling program.

Subsidence

Groundwater pumping is known to be a leading cause of subsidence in the San Joaquin Valley. However, the groundwater to be conveyed under the Proposed Action is within the range of historical pumping by the district, and would be pumped regardless of whether Reclamation allowed its conveyance in federal facilities. Therefore any subsidence associated with this use of groundwater would take place regardless of Reclamation's decision.

Land Use

The Proposed Action would support current land uses by allowing growers in Westlands Water District to make the most effective use of water that is available to them. Water conveyed in the San Luis Canal would only be used to sustain existing crops. The water would not be used to support new development or convert fallow land for agriculture.

Some groundwater wells included in the Proposed Action are located in areas known to be impacted by drainage. However, the wells are all screened below the Corcoran Clay layer which separates the shallow and deep aquifers. Therefore the water pumped from these wells would not come from the layers which are drainage-impaired. The groundwater pumped and conveyed under the Proposed Action would also not be used on land known to be drainage-impaired.

Biological Resources

Under the Proposed Action, the water would help to keep agricultural lands in production. No native lands or lands fallowed and untilled for three or more years could be brought into production with the use of the water involved in the Proposed Action. The water introduced into the San Luis Canal would not mix with any wildlife refuge supplies, as none are delivered from that facility. No drainage would be generated that could make its way into aquatic habitat potentially used by the giant garter snake or California least tern.

Reclamation has determined that the Proposed Action would not impact any Federally listed or proposed species or critical habitat.

Environmental Justice

The Proposed Action would support agriculture by allowing conveyance of groundwater and other sources of non-CVP water to support existing crops. Since farm laborers often come from minority and low-income communities, supporting farm employment is a benefit to those disadvantaged groups.

Cumulative Impacts

Surface Water

The San Luis Canal carries water from CVP, SWP and other sources, for use by contractors located along the San Luis Canal/California Aqueduct. Poor water quality from multiple sources has the potential to cause a cumulative impact on downstream water users. In order to reduce the risk of cumulative impacts to water quality, all water introduced to the San Luis Canal would be tested prior to introduction, and if water quality standards cannot be met, introductions from that source would not be allowed until water quality standards are met.

Groundwater

Many irrigation districts and individual growers in the San Joaquin Valley rely on groundwater as part of their supply, with volumes pumped varying in response to surface water allocations (CVP and SWP), hydrologic conditions and changes in crop patterns. Pumped water may be used directly on-site, sold/transferred, or exchanged for water at another location.

Groundwater overdraft is an ongoing challenge throughout California, and the San Joaquin Valley in particular has been identified as a high priority for establishing a sustainability plan. Overdraft is a cumulative problem, caused by

many small actions throughout the basin. However, the Proposed Action only allows conveyance of water that would already be pumped to areas within the district with the greatest need. Therefore there would be no contribution to cumulative impacts to groundwater as a result of the Proposed Action itself.

Subsidence

Subsidence in the San Joaquin Valley is a cumulative problem, caused by groundwater pumping at many locations throughout the area. Pumping of the groundwater which would be conveyed under the Proposed Action may contribute to ongoing subsidence trends. However, that water is likely to be pumped for agricultural use in similar volumes regardless of Reclamation's decision. Therefore the Proposed Action itself would not contribute to cumulative subsidence impacts beyond ongoing existing trends.

Land Use

The Proposed Action would allow for more effective use of water supplies in a time of shortage. This helps to mitigate the impacts of external challenges, in particular California's ongoing drought. Several similar water-moving actions have been authorized or are currently under review. Cumulatively they are expected to provide a benefit to existing land uses.

Since groundwater pumped for the Proposed Action would be drawn from the aquifer below the Corcoran Clay layer, and water would not be applied to the areas known to be drainage-impaired, the Proposed Action is not anticipated to cumulatively contribute to these existing impairments.

Environmental Justice

The Proposed Action would allow conveyance of water to support agriculture in a time of shortage. Because of agriculture's importance to the area's economy, any impacts, either positive or negative, tend to have a disproportionate and cumulative effect on employment and wages. Farm laborers often come from low-income and minority populations and they are therefore disproportionately affected by these trends. Several similar water-moving actions have been authorized or are currently under review. Cumulatively they are expected to provide a benefit to the economic well-being of disadvantaged groups.