10 October 2016

Dear Elected Official,

Acting together as a broad coalition of river, Bay and coastal stakeholders, representing a diversity of fishing, conservation, recreation and business interests, we write to ask for your support for improving streamflow in the rivers that feed San Francisco Bay – the vital first step toward improving the health and productivity of the Bay itself and of its vast watershed, as well as the thousands of jobs and the Bay Area’s unrivaled quality of life, that depend on healthy waterways.

As you may know, the State Water Resources Control Board (Water Board) is in the process of updating the water quality standards for the Bay-Delta estuary, as required under the federal and state Clean Water Acts. Despite significant declines in the health of the Bay and Delta ecosystems, the Water Board has not substantively updated the Plan since 1995. Thus, we have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to consider the importance of healthy rivers and a healthy estuary to the Bay Area and all of California.

Over the next two to three years, the Water Board will be setting new standards that in sum will determine the total amount of flow from the Central Valley that must reach the Bay-Delta estuary in order to restore its ecosystem and maintain adequate water quality. Over the next six months, in Phase I of the update, the Water Board is poised to finalize the standards that will set how much flow from the rivers of the salmon-bearing San Joaquin River basin must reach the Bay-Delta estuary (Phase 2 will address how much flow from the Sacramento River basin must reach the estuary, and the total inflow to San Francisco Bay). Currently, more than two-thirds of the San Joaquin basin’s flow is diverted in a typical year before it can reach the Bay-Delta Estuary – in some months, more than 95% of the flow is diverted.

As a result of this over-drafting of our rivers, the once great salmon-bearing rivers of the San Joaquin River system no longer contribute to the State’s salmon fishery, and downstream water quality in the estuary continues to deteriorate, facilitating more frequent occurrence of toxic algal blooms. Historically, over 400,000 adult salmon returned through the Bay-Delta estuary to spawn in the San Joaquin basin. Today, juvenile mortality in the basin is so high that we are lucky if just a few thousand naturally-spawned salmon return to their natal streams to spawn.

Fishing communities and families in California, Oregon and Washington all depend on the production of Central Valley salmon, including from the San Joaquin’s tributaries, but the pain of diminished fishing opportunities is most acute right here in the Bay Area. The overall decline of the Bay Area’s salmon fishery has led to a loss of fishing infrastructure in ports at Half Moon Bay and San Francisco’s Fishermen’s Wharf, and business closures for fishermen, wholesalers
and restaurants that relied on once-robust local salmon harvests. Since 1996, the tonnage of salmon landed in the ports of San Francisco and Half Moon Bay declined a disastrous 80% and revenue to the fleet has dropped by 30% (the disparity is due to scarcity-driven inflation that is a burden to consumers). Make no mistake – families across the commercial fishing value chain, recreational anglers, and the businesses that support them, are all suffering the costs of inadequate streamflow caused by unsustainable water diversions.

Scientists from the California Department of Fish & Wildlife, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Water Board’s own staff have all confirmed that at least 50% of the river basin’s total flow (unimpaired runoff, or what would occur in the absence of dams and diversions) is needed to stop the destruction of the salmon runs, and that restoring 60% would actually rebuild those devastated fisheries and achieve the state and federal mandate to double anadromous fish populations from their 1967-1991 averages. Sadly, since the Water Board adopted the doubling goal in its 1995 plan, little has been done in the way of implementation or enforcement to achieve this goal.

We are therefore deeply concerned that the Water Board is proposing to require only 40% of unimpaired flows on the San Joaquin River tributaries, in deference to those voices calling for the continuation of unsustainable deliveries of river water to irrigated agriculture in the San Joaquin Valley. Quite simply, our rivers, fisheries and jobs need more than 40% to survive.

California has adopted coequal state water policy goals of providing a more reliable water supply for California, while simultaneously protecting, restoring, and enhancing the Bay-Delta ecosystem. Achieving these co-equal goals is undermined by a flow decision that would leave less than half of the flow in the State’s second longest river, when science tells us that more is needed to protect and restore the Delta’s living resources and water quality and when innovative water management approaches are available to secure alternative supplies.

Potential impacts to other beneficial uses of water can be ameliorated or avoided completely through Californians’ technical ingenuity, willingness to conserve and investments in alternative water supplies. For example, between 2006 and 2016, 2.6 million Bay Area residents reduced their reliance on the Tuolumne River by 30% through conservation alone. Demand reduction, water use efficiency improvements, water recycling and reuse, stormwater recapture, and other tools can help offset reductions in surface water supply resulting from restoring the flow of fresh water to the San Joaquin River and its tributaries.

We therefore ask that you join our coalition, and the many Bay Area communities that have resolved to support improving Central Valley river flow, to send a strong message of support to the State Water Board for a decision that will increase San Joaquin River flow requirements to levels that will restore native fish populations, protect the Bay-Delta Estuary’s water quality, and re-establish a balance among competing beneficial uses of water that is sustainable.

For more information on the Phase I process and San Joaquin Flows, please visit this NRDC Fact Sheet.²

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¹ See text of the resolutions here: http://www.friendsofsestuary.org/sf-estuary-resolutions.html
² Available at: https://www.nrdc.org/sites/default/files/saving-san-joaquin-river-tributaries-ib.pdf
Sincerely,

Gary Bobker, Rivers and Delta Program Director
The Bay Institute

Peter Drekmeier, Policy Director
Tuolumne River Trust

Tim Sloane, Executive Director
Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen’s Associations
Institute for Fisheries Resources

Mitch Avalon, Board President
Friends of the San Francisco Estuary

Kate Poole, Senior Attorney
Natural Resources Defense Council

John McManus, Executive Director
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Heinrich Albert and Sonia Diermayer, Water Committee Co-Chairs
Sierra Club San Francisco Bay Chapter

Katja Irvin, Water Committee Chair
Sierra Club Loma Prieta Chapter

Chris Shutes, FERC Project Director
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