

Saltier Water OKd for Delta

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The state adopted emergency drought-year regulations yesterday that are intended to stretch water supplies by letting the water get saltier in the Sacramento-San Joaquin delta.

The regulations, approved unanimously by the state Water Resources Control Board, follow in general proposals offered last week by Water Resources Director Ronald Robie.

The emergency standards will

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permit the state to release less fresh water from its reservoirs into delta waterways for the rest of this year. And the result will be that more damaging, salty seawater will push its way into the delta.

The goal is to stretch water supplies in case the drought continues unabated next year. John Bryson, chairman of the water board, said that without emergency regulations the state reservoirs "could simply run out of water."

In that case, Bryson said, salt water damage to the delta would be horrendous, "and it would preclude use of the water supply on which much of California depends."

The emergency regulations did not take a position for or against Robie's proposal to build three rock barriers on delta streams, costing a total of \$4 million, to impede saltwater intrusion. Several less costly barriers already are under construction.

After the board's meeting, Bryson said that Robie is still debating the merits of the rock barriers with federal water officials, who doubt they would do much good.

The emergency regulations were adopted for the remainder of this year, although the board promised to adjust them if the drought picture improves.

The board also promised to work with the state Department of Health in monitoring the salt content of delta streams. The health agency warned this week that the water may become unsafe to drink for persons who have heart or kidney ailments or hypertension.

One state water official suggested persons with those problems should ask their doctors whether they should switch to bottled water if they live in areas served by delta drinking water — in Contra Costa, Alameda and Santa Clara counties.

At its hearing yesterday, the Water Resources Control Board made its decision after a perfunctory reading of the new, highly technical regulations, with no explanation to spectators of their effects.

In interviews later, Bryson and board aides said that the regulations will allow the chloride content of water at Clifton Court Forebay, at the south end of the delta, to increase to an average of 300 milligrams per liter. It is now at roughly 250 milligrams per liter, Bryson said.

If the drought is relieved by the rainy season that starts next October, extra water gathered in the state's Lake Oroville, Reservoir would have to be used first to return the Delta to its regular quality standards, the regulations specify. This would occur if the total amount of water flowing into the lake exceeds 2.9 million acre-feet, typical of a year that is dry but not a drought.

The regulations also prohibit storing more than 300,000 acre-feet of water in the state's San Luis Reservoir south of the delta. The board ruled that water stored there can be used for emergency municipal supplies in the Bay Area but not for agricultural uses in the Central Valley unless the state water board gives special permission.