

# San Francisco Chronicle

## Opinion: San Francisco doesn't have a sustainable drought plan

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Hetch Hetchy Reservoir, viewed from airplane, collects water from the Grand Canyon of the Tuolumne in Yosemite National Park

Tom Stienstra/ The Chronicle

Two weeks ago, the “greenest city in America” sued California’s State Water Board to prevent measures that would restore the beleaguered San Francisco Bay-Delta.

After more than a decade of studies based on the best available science, the state wants to require San Francisco to release more water from its dams into the Tuolumne River — the source of our Hetch Hetchy drinking water — to benefit fish, wildlife and downstream water quality.

The San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, meanwhile, wants a “voluntary agreement” for the Tuolumne River. Instead of providing the river with desperately needed flow, the city is proposing power-washing spawning gravel, building a fish barrier that would somehow block undesired fish, but allow “good” fish to pass unmolested, and restoring a small amount of floodplain habitat for baby fish. These half-measures are doomed to fail. Floodplains without enough water to inundate them are useless. A peer review commissioned by the National Marine Fisheries Service debunked the science behind the SFPUC’s proposal.

City Attorney Dennis Herrera, who Mayor Breed wants to appoint as the new General Manager of the SFPUC, is leading the lawsuit charge. The litigation is based on a Trump-era rule that has been challenged in court by California’s Attorney General and is likely to be abandoned by the Biden administration. It aims to weaken the state’s authority to safeguard water quality, an outcome that could have repercussions nationwide.

Is this really the position San Francisco wants to be in, siding with Trump to block the state’s ability to protect our environment?

If the SFPUC were serious about stewardship, the Tuolumne would not be in such dire straits. Where over 100,000 salmon once spawned, barely 1,000 returned last year. Gone are the millions of pounds of ocean-derived nutrients the salmon faithfully transported to upland habitats where they fueled the food web and fertilized the soil. The fact that 4 out of every 5 gallons of water are diverted from the Tuolumne is the leading cause of its demise.

The negative impacts of these unsustainable water diversions ripple throughout the Bay-Delta. Six fish species are listed as endangered or threatened as a result of insufficient freshwater inflow. San Francisco’s lawsuit increases the likelihood we will experience a mass extinction in the not too distant future. It also increases the risk that the commercial salmon fishing industry at Fisherman’s

Wharf will be relegated to the history books, and that delta communities will continue to suffer from toxic algae blooms tied to insufficient river flows.

The SFPUC wants you to believe the state's plan to protect the Tuolumne River and San Francisco Bay-Delta would lead to water shortages during droughts. They claim their own plan would produce more fish, using less water than the state's measures. Both of these statements are false.

Even after two severely dry winters, the SFPUC has enough water stored in reservoirs to last roughly 4½ years. In an average year, San Francisco's water rights entitle it to three times as much water as is needed, so its reservoirs fill quickly after a drought. In 2017, shortly after the past drought, the city was allowed to capture enough water to last 12 years, but had to dump 88% because its reservoirs were already full with a six-year supply.

People who conserved during that drought should be outraged that their efforts provided almost no environmental benefit. Their work was hoarded behind dams, only to be dumped in a single year. The Tuolumne River experienced one good year at the expense of five terrible years.

San Francisco does have a more sustainable path. By continuing our decades-long trend of using less water, investing much more in alternative water supplies such as recycled water, and partnering with San Joaquin Valley irrigation districts to bring agriculture into the 21st century, we can meet the state's co-equal goals of restoring the Bay-Delta and Tuolumne River ecosystems while ensuring a reliable water supply well into the future. Los Angeles and Orange County turned in this direction years ago. It's time for the SFPUC to catch up.

San Franciscans deserve a plan that represents their environmental values. Supervisor Aaron Peskin has introduced a resolution encouraging the city to pause its suit and to follow the science. Environmentally minded citizens should support the supervisor's leadership.

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