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## OPEN FORUM

# Don't ignore the San Francisco Bay's needs during the drought

By Gary Bobker | April 20, 2015



Photo: Tomas Ovalle, Special To The Chronicle

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**Water diversions that reduce bay inflows from the delta are threatening already-struggling fall-run chinook salmon.**

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Society functions best when its members have a sense of sharing equitably in good times and bad. California's four-year drought has exposed how far we are from that ideal. Gov. Jerry Brown's decision to require 25 percent mandatory urban conservation while ignoring agriculture — which consumes 80 percent of developed water supply — has been widely criticized. But most people barely are aware that the heaviest burden to conserve water is on our beloved San Francisco Bay estuary — and as a result the bay may experience a wave of species extinctions in the coming months and years.

Native fish and wildlife already were in poor shape when the drought began, with

half the natural flow diverted on average before it reached the bay. But in order to save water over the last two years, the State Water Resources Control Board has virtually eliminated even the minimal bay inflows required under the Clean Water Act — which the state has acknowledged were already insufficient to protect the estuary — with entirely predictable results. In 2014, only a third of natural runoff made it to the bay, and populations of many native species dropped to record or near-record low levels. Now the bay is on the verge of permanent damage, potentially losing numerous native fish and gaining undesirable invasive species that thrive under lower flows instead.

It's not unreasonable to balance the needs of people and the environment, during the drought and beyond. Bay inflow requirements were designed to ensure that human health and safety are protected at all costs, and the remaining water shared between the environment and people proportionally as the system gets wetter or drier. The end result of suspending protections is that the bay's environment gets almost nothing during the drought. So much for sharing.

Who benefits from eliminating protections? Much of the water saved from suspending the rules will go to farmers with senior water rights, who will use some of the water to grow thirsty crops such as almonds for export and sell the rest to others doing the same. Extreme drought means severe cutbacks this year to contractors of the giant federal and state water projects that pump water (at unsustainably high levels, to be sure) from the delta, but senior water rights holders served by the same projects (and selling water to those contractors) will receive 75 percent of supply — more water than nature provided in this fourth drought year.

One definition of tragedy is when good people allow bad things to happen. Does Gov. Brown really want to preside over the extinction of chinook salmon, delta smelt and other species found nowhere else on Earth? Are all of us who love the bay estuary, from Sacramento and Stockton to San Francisco, going to let it happen on his watch — and ours?

Brown's water board should act now to provide minimum flows needed to prevent extinction, and then issue new water quality standards that ensure a fairer share of the flows needed to support a healthy bay ecosystem. The governor should also require that all water users do their part to conserve water during the drought, move aggressively to end wasteful and

unreasonable agricultural irrigation practices, and convene experts to recommend changes to a water rights system that prevents California from preserving its environment and meeting the needs of all its residents, not just a privileged few.

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