



Media Review of Right-Wing Narratives: Delta Smelt

Purpose: The purpose of this document is to detail the narrative that right wing media outlets and spokespeople have created throughout the years – that protection of the delta smelt is the cause of economic hardship and water challenges for Central Valley farmers.

Fox News

[Part 1 of Hannity - The Valley Hope Forgot](#) (September 2009)

- Episode dedicated to the Delta Smelt – attributed water scarcity and the Central Valley’s economic hardships to measures taken to protect the species.
- “Farms in this once fertile area have dried up all because the government has put the interest of a two-inch minnow before all the great people that you see out here tonight.”

[Sean Hannity exposes the man-made drought in California](#) (September 2009)

- “Representative Nunes estimates that 37,000 jobs have been lost due to the smelt issue”

Related Counter discussion – [The California Drought and Fox News](#) (2009) Podcast and discussion countering the narrative of Fox News.

- Explores how Fox News has politicized the drought and blames Obama/environmental regulations, particularly protecting Delta smelt and Chinook salmon, for water shortages affecting farmers.
- Critiques the media’s role in spreading misleading information, calls for more balanced coverage and cooperative solutions to the water crisis in California.

Representative David Nunes

[Emergency Water Bill Floor Debate - Rep. Nunes](#) (February 2014)

- In this clip, Rep. Nunes says that there'd be no drought problem in the San Joaquin Valley if it wasn't for measures like the Endangered Species Act and the Central Valley Project Improvement Act (CVPIA), and also claims that the real threat to the delta smelt is urban sewage discharge from Bay Area cities.

National Review

[Green Drought: For the sake of the smelt, California farmland lies fallow - National Review](#)

(January 2014)

- The author argues that policies to protect the Delta smelt have worsened the impacts of drought – restricting water usage for agriculture and leading to significant economic damage to farmers.
- “You have almost certainly never heard of the Delta smelt and, in all honesty, nor should you have. As fish go, it is undistinguished. Inedible, short-lived, and growing to a maximum length of just under three inches, smelt are of interest to nobody much — except, that is, to the implacable foot soldiers of the modern environmental movement, some of whom have recently elevated the smelt’s well-being above all else that has traditionally been considered to be of value. Human beings, the production of food, and the distribution of life-enabling water can all be damned, it seems. All hail the smelt, the most important animal in America” – CEO John Harris, Harris Farms

[SB1: Donald Trump Derangement Syndrome Comes for California's Water - National Review](#)

(August 2019)

- Article critiquing California’s SB1 legislation aimed to protect state environmental regulations from federal changes under the Trump administration.
- “Now, rather than allow that pumping — because the pumps kill a threatened fish, the infamous Delta smelt (the farmers’ offer to hatch and repopulate the fish in the Delta is met with a bureaucratic no) — billions of gallons of fresh water instead flow from the Delta west, much of its passing under the Golden Gate Bridge on its way into the Pacific Ocean. In other words, a tiny fish trumps America’s food needs and the economy of the Central Valley. No water or restricted water means much farmland goes unplanted and unplowed, which in turn means thousands of jobs (remember once upon a time when the fruit pickers were revered by liberal Democrats?) dry up. Literally.”

Wall Street Journal

[Forget the Missing Rainfall, California. Where’s the Delta Smelt? - Wall Street Journal](#) (April 2015)

- Argues that the government’s actions, based on flawed science, prioritize environmental agendas over the state’s water needs, negatively impacting farmers and communities and claims policies have failed.
- “To protect smelt from water pumps, government regulators have flushed 1.4 trillion gallons of water into the San Francisco Bay since 2008. That would have been enough to sustain 6.4 million Californians for six years.”
- “Even if the delta smelt were eliminated from the delta forever, the federal government would continue to restrict pumping to protect other fish: the longfin smelt, steelhead and Chinook winter-run salmon. And green groups would continue petitioning the government to expand its list of endangered species. Parched Californians may soon wonder when it’s their turn for such concern.”

California Globe

[California Releasing Water from Reservoirs, Claiming Drought Conditions](#) (April 2021)

- Critique of state water agencies and Newsom for prioritizing environmental policies that favor wildlife over storage, arguing that water management has been poorly handled, leading to wasted resources.
- “What they don’t say is that the state has been letting water out of reservoirs across California for months now. And it’s not going to farmers, growers, ranchers or urban use. Environmental policy says the water “flows” from reservoirs are necessary to produce a rebound of endangered Delta smelt and Chinook salmon. However, these policies are a

failure as neither species have been collected in all of the latest trawling surveys, where they spend several days a month searching in more than 200 spots. This practice of releasing water and hoping fish improve, has been unsuccessful for nearly 30 years, according to Kristi Diener, a California water expert and third-generation Central Valley farmer. Both species are close to extinction.”

Reason

[Delta Smelt v. Central Valley Farmers: The Battle Continues](#) (February 2012)

- Video exploring the environmental impacts protecting the Delta smelt are having on agriculture and undocumented farm works.
- “In 2007, federal judge Oliver Wanger imposed limits on the amount of water pumped from the San Joaquin-Sacramento River delta to farms in California's Central Valley in order to protect a two-inch endangered fish called the Delta Smelt. As a result, several hundred thousand acres of farmland on the west side of the Central Valley now lie fallow, and many thousands of jobs have been lost. In the city of Mendota, for example, the unemployment rate exceeds 40%.”

Farm Progress

[Delta smelt shuts down major water supply - Farm Progress](#) (June 2007)

- Article critiques shutting down pumps as overly disruptive, suggesting that while meant to protect the Delta smelt, they also cause significant hardship for water users and call for a balanced approach to water management and species protection.
- “All it took was a sparse population of minnow-like smelt and two days for state and federal water contractors to turn off the drinking and irrigation water spigots for 25 million Californians and almost 1 million acres of farmland. The Department of Water Resources (DWR) stopped pumping at State Water Project (SWP) facilities in the Delta in late May to protect the Delta smelt. A day later, federal officials dramatically cut back the amount of water being pumped to farmers and Southern California cities to the lowest level ever in an attempt to help save the endangered Delta smelt.”

The Sacramento Bee

[Delta pumps throttled back despite rains, cutting California water deliveries to protect fish](#)

(January 2022)

- “Del Bosque is dependent on water pumped south from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta to irrigate his crops on the Valley’s west side in Fresno and Merced counties. These last two years of drought-driven pumping restrictions have forced him to leave fields barren and reduce water available to his valuable almond trees — cutting into his bottom line. He’d hoped the federal government would crank up its pumps and start sending water his way now that the Delta is flush with storm runoff in what’s so far been a remarkably wet fall and winter in much of Northern California. Instead, to protect Delta smelt — a nearly extinct fish that’s come to symbolize California’s never-ending fight over water — regulators throttled back the pumps that supply drinking water to 25 million people from Silicon Valley to Orange County and millions of acres of farmland like Del Bosque’s.”

Phys.org

[Farmers in dry California decry decision involving appeals \(Update\)](#) (January 2015)

- “Farmers say their economic interests have been ignored while officials protect the fish. Roadside signs throughout the Central Valley decry the lack of leadership while warning of a second Dust Bowl. “I’d like to see a little more common sense put into it,” said Jim Jasper, an almond farmer who appealed to the high court. “Agriculture has been overlooked.” Because of the drought and restrictions to protect smelt, Jasper said he had to cut down one-fifth of his almond trees last year. The 70-year-old farmer who runs Stewart & Jasper Orchards in Newman anticipates taking out some of his citrus crops if the drought persists. Many farmers such as Jasper did not get any irrigation water last year from a federal system of canals and reservoirs, forcing them to rely on diminishing groundwater or rip out trees.”

Turlock Journal

[Drought not over for some California farmers thanks to questionable Delta smelt regulations - Turlock Journal](#) (June 2024)

- “The Delta smelt benefited from massive releases of stored water to send more fresh water into the Delta in a bid to help them. That also meant less water for growers in the southern part of the San Joaquin Valley. Those releases have been criticized by impacted farmers who argue the water is simply going out to sea and not being diverted for human uses especially during drought periods. They point to surveys of Delta smelt populations before and after such massive releases and note the decline in numbers haven’t slowed down.”
- “Keeping flows as high as possible to “protect” the Delta smelt makes sense to environmentalists. That’s because they view the Delta smelt at the proverbial canary in the coal mine as being the most sensitive fish to changes in Delta waterways. The health of the ecological system and the need for water that is being commandeered by regulations imposed by court decisions is why the 4-inch fish has become — depending upon how you look at things — the poster fish for all that is wrong with California water development, or the whipping fish for how state water policy has been skewed. The

devastating California drought is officially over but not for the handful of state and federal bureaucrats that owe their jobs to the Delta smelt.”

California Farm Water Coalition

<https://www.farmwater.org/farm-water-news/frustrations-mount-over-fish-protections/>

- “The frustration expressed by the letter-writer is shared by many, including farmers who are unable to plant their fields because of restricted water supplies and city residents who have seen their water bills go up. But the Delta smelt, which has caused much of these effects on Californians, is listed under the Endangered Species Act. That means the law says it must be protected. **The Bay Delta Conservation Plan (BDCP) and its two tunnels are the best hope to provide farmers and the urban community with a reliable water supply and, at the same time, increase habitat for the smelt and other species in the Delta.**”

Trump-Specific News

- At a [March 2016 campaign rally in Fresno](#) (October 2018), then presidential candidate Trump mocked the environmentalists who were desperate “to protect a certain kind of three-inch fish”: “They have farms here and they don’t get water. It is so ridiculous they’re taking the water and shoving it out to sea.”
- [October, 2019](#): Trump Administration Moves to Lift Protections for Fish and Divert Water to Farms (also seen in [this LA Times piece](#)).
- [Trump warns California will have to ration water because it dumps so much in the sea to help 'certain little tiny fish' - The Independent](#)
 - “Donald Trump returned to an old campaign attack line ridiculing Democrats for transporting “little tiny fish” from California’s deltas out to sea, as he claimed the state would soon “have to ration water”. Speaking with Fox News’ host Sean Hannity, the US president suggested on Thursday that the Democrat-run state would have to ration water supplies because of policies protecting a small fish species known as delta smelt.”

Ethics Violations

- The Trump administration weakened protections for Delta smelt, allowing large amounts of water to be diverted from the Delta to farmland. This decision involves [ethics questions about then Interior Secretary David Bernhardt](#), who was the lobbyist for a group of wealthy farmers who benefited from the plan until just months before he joined the Trump administration.