



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

February 3, 2026

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California Tribes and Communities Condemn Voluntary Water Agreements, Citing Risks to Rivers, Salmon, and Communities

Sacramento, CA – Yesterday Tribes, youth, fisheries and environmental organizations submitted written comments condemning the latest version of the Bay Delta Water Quality Control plan and Voluntary agreements. This came after Tribal members, fishing families, youth, and community allies delivered strong opposition to the Bay Delta Plan’s Voluntary Agreements at a three day hearing last week. They rallied, hosted panels, and submitted public testimony to the California State Water Board in Sacramento.

Opposition to the Voluntary Agreements has grown as new federal actions threaten more water exports. Gary Mulcahy, Government Liaison of the Winnemem Wintu Tribe, warned, “The clueless SWRCB continues to advocate for an 8-year experiment that fails to meet water, environmental, and aquatic species needs on so many levels as the VAs currently stand.” He added, “Now with the Trump administration’s ROD on Action 5 promising additional water deliveries of 130,000 to 180,000 acre feet out of the Delta, the VAs can no longer be considered even partially viable.”

If adopted, the Bay-Delta Plan and VAs would overhaul water management, risking drinking water, recreating, and river health across nearly every watershed feeding the Bay-Delta, including the Sacramento, Feather, American, Yuba, Trinity, and Klamath Rivers. Advocates

warn that the plan elevates large agricultural interests at the cost of Tribal Sovereignty, fishing communities, and river ecosystems.

“Replacing water quality protections with Voluntary Agreements puts the needs of corporations and agriculture above drinking water protections, communities, and rivers,” said Regina Chichizola, Executive Director of Save California Salmon. “The VA pathway ignores years of Tribal, scientific, and public input. It sets a dangerous precedent that voluntary compliance can replace California’s pollution laws. We have no idea why Newsom continues to push them.”

Last Thursday and Friday, Delta Tribes testified they were shut out of the process, despite being seriously impacted. Vince LaPena from the Wilton Rancheria testified, “For Wilton Rancheria, Delta conditions directly affect cultural practices, subsistence activities, and stewardship responsibilities. Salmon and other aquatic species are not merely ecological indicators; they are integral to the Tribe’s cultural identity, traditional knowledge systems, food sovereignty, and responsibilities to future generations.” Other Tribes testified they were not consulted or included in the VA process, despite having critical connections with, and rights to, the waters impacted.

Frankie Myers, a Yurok Tribal member and Principal of Fix the World Consulting, reflected, “For generations, California built its water system by excluding Tribal Nations—treating our rights as invisible while benefiting from our rivers, our lands, and our stewardship. The Bay-Delta Plan cannot move forward honestly without confronting that legacy. Reconciliation is not symbolic; it requires the State to acknowledge its history of injustice and take meaningful action to correct a system that has long denied Tribes a rightful seat at the table.”

Myers continued, “Now is the time to reconcile that history and build a water governance framework that recognizes Tribal water rights as fundamental to California’s future, not optional!”

Fishing communities are also urging the board to choose regulation instead of Voluntary Agreements. Vance Staplin, Executive Director of the Golden State Salmon Association, emphasized, “Water diversions are devastating California’s largest salmon runs. Commercial fishing has been shut down for three years, causing serious hardship for fishing families, businesses, and communities.” He called on the State Water Board to act. “The State Board has the sole authority to restore these salmon runs,” he said, “and must reject Governor Newsom’s backroom water deal. Listen to the facts, and require the river flows salmon need to survive.”

Morning Star Gali, Pit River Tribal member and Executive Director of Indigenous Justice, warned that the VAs deepen harm to Tribal communities. “After decades of fighting for clean rivers, salmon restoration, and the remediation of toxic mercury contamination, Tribal peoples are again forced to carry the burden of protecting our waterways for current and future generations,” Gali said. “The VA’s role in privatizing water and prioritizing corporate profit over people must be addressed. We are at a critical moment. We must act now to stop this harm.”

Youth and Tribal community members say this is a defining moment. Onjalee Harrison, a Karuk Tribal youth and 8th-grade student traveling to Sacramento, said, “Without enough water, our fishing traditions and ceremonies like Boat Dances are at risk. As Native people, it is our responsibility to protect the fish, the river, and our future. This is why I oppose Voluntary Agreements that would dramatically impact my life and so many others.”

To watch Thursday's powerful testimony to California from Tribal leaders, go to:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjlasXr-zNg>. Testimony starts at minute 3:33.

To watch Friday's Youth and Tribal panels go to

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LT028nCYjIQ> minute 1:45.

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Photos attached