

## **Appendix O**

### **Comment Letters**

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UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY  
 REGION IX  
 75 Hawthorne Street  
 San Francisco, CA 94105

DFC 15 2014

Mr. Brad Hubbard  
 Bureau of Reclamation  
 2800 Cottage Way  
 Sacramento, California 95825

Subject: Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the Long Term Water Transfers Project,  
 Various Counties, California (CEQ# 20140290)

Dear Mr. Hubbard:

The Environmental Protection Agency has reviewed the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for the above referenced document. Our review is pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act, Council on Environmental Quality regulations (40 CFR Parts 1500-1508), and our NEPA review authority under Section 309 of the Clean Air Act.

The Long Term Water Transfers Project would implement a 10-year water transfer program to move water from willing sellers upstream of the Sacramento/San Joaquin Delta to willing buyers south of the Delta. Long-term water transfers have the potential to provide improved flexibility in the allocation, management, and use of water resources. When implemented in conjunction with a water management system that includes efficiency improvements, conservation, and environmental protection, they can be an important tool for ensuring that California's scarce water supplies are put to their highest priority use.

While EPA supports the goal of improving water management flexibility, we also recognize that the Delta faces interrelated problems of inadequate water supplies, instream flow deficits, water quality impairments, and degraded aquatic habitats. Many of the groundwater aquifers that previously supported ecosystem processes across the estuary and provided water consumers with a hedge against drought have been overdrawn and depleted to historic levels. The extreme drought of the past 3 years has produced precipitous declines in groundwater elevations statewide, including level decreases of more than 10 feet for some monitored wells in the project area. Land subsidence associated with groundwater overdraft not only impacts infrastructure, water quality, and ecosystems, but also permanently reduces the State's capacity to store water underground. Water transfers would affect each of these conditions; therefore, they must be carefully designed and implemented, based upon the best available data, to ensure that adverse impacts are minimized and the interests of all affected parties and the environment are appropriately considered.

In the DEIS, BOR concludes that, after mitigation, the proposed project would result in less than significant or beneficial environmental impacts for all resources. Based on our review, EPA finds that the DEIS does not contain sufficient information to support this conclusion for many resource areas, particularly groundwater, air quality, fisheries, and wildlife.

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The DEIS identifies potentially significant impacts to groundwater levels and land subsidence associated with groundwater substitution water transfers. It states that proposed mitigation would reduce these impacts to less than significant for all groundwater basins in the seller's service area. However, the proposed mitigation is vague and defers the responsibility for developing detailed mitigation plans to the water transfer applicants. This precludes meaningful evaluation of the viability and effectiveness of BOR's proposed approach to mitigation. Furthermore, the modeling performed to assess groundwater-related impacts depends upon a data set spanning 1970 to 2003. The use of this truncated data set means that recent trends and current existing conditions are not appropriately taken into account in the impact analysis. Absent sufficient information regarding both mitigation and existing conditions, the DEIS does not demonstrate that the proposed project would not adversely affect groundwater levels.

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Similarly, while the DEIS concludes that mitigation measures would render potential impacts to air quality to less than significant levels, the two mitigation measures proposed for air impacts essentially amount to a guarantee from BOR that emissions will not be allowed to exceed applicable thresholds. Without information on how these measures would be implemented and enforced on a transfer by transfer basis, it is not clear that the mitigation would successfully prevent exceedence of de minimis values under EPA's General Conformity rule or local air quality thresholds.

5

Finally, the DEIS analysis with regard to fisheries and terrestrial wildlife understates a number of potentially significant adverse impacts upon these resources, thereby rendering unsupportable the conclusion that these impacts will be less than significant. For both fisheries and wildlife impacts, significance thresholds identified in the DEIS are focused around special status species, with insufficient regard for other native communities. It is not clear why the DEIS concludes that most potential impacts to non-special-status species are inherently less than significant. Even where special status species are concerned, the impact analysis frequently depends upon conjecture, without sufficient justification or citation for significance thresholds established and impact assessments made. For example, potential impacts to migratory bird species receive only a summary consideration. Wintering waterfowl in the Sacramento Valley gather as much as 50 percent of their nourishment from rice farms, yet the DEIS concludes that the 16% reduction in flooded rice fields in some regions along the Sacramento River (11% when averaged across the entire sellers' service area) would be a less than significant project effect. The DEIS states that migrating species will simply choose appropriate habitat upon arrival. Neither this assumption, nor the conclusion that follows from it are well founded.

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Similar data gaps and unsupported conclusions are common throughout the DEIS and warrant substantial revision prior to the publication of the Final EIS. The level of detail missing from the DEIS, particularly with regard to the specific provisions of likely transfer actions and the expected requirements of future mitigation, results in an EIS document more appropriate to a programmatic analysis. Without further details regarding these aspects of the proposed project, EPA believes that the FEIS will not be sufficient to support project-level decision-making.

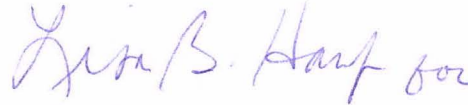
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Based on EPA's review of the Draft EIS, we have rated the Proposed Action as Environmental Concerns - Insufficient Information (EC-2). This rating reflects the potentially significant adverse environmental impacts that the project, as proposed, may have upon the terrestrial and aquatic environments of the Delta and Sacramento Valley, the lack of consideration of appropriate mitigation for some project impacts, and the need for improved disclosure related to air quality, water quality, groundwater, fisheries, vegetation/wildlife, economics, project alternatives, and mitigation. Please see the enclosed Summary of EPA Rating Definitions for a description of the rating system. Further discussion of our concerns is provided in the enclosed Detailed Comments.

9

EPA appreciates the opportunity to provide comments for this project. When the Final EIS is released for public review, please send one hard copy and one CD to the address above (Mail Code: ENF 4-2). If you have any questions, please contact me at (415) 972-3873 or contact Carter Jessop, the lead reviewer for this project. Carter can be reached at (415) 972-3815 or [jessop.carter@epa.gov](mailto:jessop.carter@epa.gov).

Sincerely,



Kathleen Martyn Goforth, Manager  
Environmental Review Section

Enclosures:

Summary of EPA Rating Definitions  
Detailed Comments

cc:

Ren Lohofener, Pacific Southwest Region, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
Maria Rea, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, National Marine Fisheries Service  
Helen Birss, California Department of Fish and Wildlife  
Diane Riddle, California State Water Resources Control Board  
Karen Huss, Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District  
Frances Mizuno, San Luis & Delta-Mendota Water Authority

## **SUMMARY OF EPA RATING DEFINITIONS\***

This rating system was developed as a means to summarize the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) level of concern with a proposed action. The ratings are a combination of alphabetical categories for evaluation of the environmental impacts of the proposal and numerical categories for evaluation of the adequacy of the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

### **ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT OF THE ACTION**

#### ***"LO" (Lack of Objections)***

The EPA review has not identified any potential environmental impacts requiring substantive changes to the proposal. The review may have disclosed opportunities for application of mitigation measures that could be accomplished with no more than minor changes to the proposal.

#### ***"EC" (Environmental Concerns)***

The EPA review has identified environmental impacts that should be avoided in order to fully protect the environment. Corrective measures may require changes to the preferred alternative or application of mitigation measures that can reduce the environmental impact. EPA would like to work with the lead agency to reduce these impacts.

#### ***"EO" (Environmental Objections)***

The EPA review has identified significant environmental impacts that should be avoided in order to provide adequate protection for the environment. Corrective measures may require substantial changes to the preferred alternative or consideration of some other project alternative (including the no action alternative or a new alternative). EPA intends to work with the lead agency to reduce these impacts.

#### ***"EU" (Environmentally Unsatisfactory)***

The EPA review has identified adverse environmental impacts that are of sufficient magnitude that they are unsatisfactory from the standpoint of public health or welfare or environmental quality. EPA intends to work with the lead agency to reduce these impacts. If the potentially unsatisfactory impacts are not corrected at the final EIS stage, this proposal will be recommended for referral to the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ).

### **ADEQUACY OF THE IMPACT STATEMENT**

#### ***"Category 1" (Adequate)***

EPA believes the draft EIS adequately sets forth the environmental impact(s) of the preferred alternative and those of the alternatives reasonably available to the project or action. No further analysis or data collection is necessary, but the reviewer may suggest the addition of clarifying language or information.

#### ***"Category 2" (Insufficient Information)***

The draft EIS does not contain sufficient information for EPA to fully assess environmental impacts that should be avoided in order to fully protect the environment, or the EPA reviewer has identified new reasonably available alternatives that are within the spectrum of alternatives analysed in the draft EIS, which could reduce the environmental impacts of the action. The identified additional information, data, analyses, or discussion should be included in the final EIS.

#### ***"Category 3" (Inadequate)***

EPA does not believe that the draft EIS adequately assesses potentially significant environmental impacts of the action, or the EPA reviewer has identified new, reasonably available alternatives that are outside of the spectrum of alternatives analysed in the draft EIS, which should be analysed in order to reduce the potentially significant environmental impacts. EPA believes that the identified additional information, data, analyses, or discussions are of such a magnitude that they should have full public review at a draft stage. EPA does not believe that the draft EIS is adequate for the purposes of the NEPA and/or Section 309 review, and thus should be formally revised and made available for public comment in a supplemental or revised draft EIS. On the basis of the potential significant impacts involved, this proposal could be a candidate for referral to the CEQ.

\*From EPA Manual 1640, Policy and Procedures for the Review of Federal Actions Impacting the Environment.

**EPA Detailed Comments for the Long Term Water Transfers Draft EIS,  
Various Counties, California, December 15, 2014**

**Air Quality**

The proposed project spans five air basins, including numerous attainment, nonattainment, and maintenance areas for a number of National Ambient Air Quality criteria pollutants. Groundwater substitution water transfers would necessitate the use of diesel, natural gas, or electrically powered pumps. According to the DEIS (p. 3.5-38), and as referenced in Appendix F (page F-1), the emissions from these pumps, in particular those powered by diesel fuel, have the potential to exceed the applicable de minimis value for nitrogen oxides (NO<sub>x</sub>) established under EPA's General Conformity Rule for the Sacramento Metro non-attainment area. Table F-1 indicates that unmitigated emissions would exceed the de minimis threshold nearly fourfold. In addition, groundwater substitution pumping has the potential to emit criteria pollutants at levels that exceed local air district significance thresholds for volatile organic compounds (VOCs) and NO<sub>x</sub> in the Feather River Air Quality Management District and for NO<sub>x</sub> for the Sacramento Metropolitan AQMD.

In order to address these potential impacts, the DEIS includes mitigation measure AQ-1: "Reduce pumping at diesel or natural gas wells to reduce pumping below significance levels." (p. 3.5-43) It indicates that, following application of this measure, all project emissions are modeled to fall below applicable thresholds. EPA is concerned that measure AQ-1 is very vague. The single paragraph description provided is insufficient to determine whether this measure is capable of achieving the described emissions reductions. It is unclear how BOR would limit diesel or natural gas well pumping and manage individual transfer permits to ensure cumulative compliance. The mechanisms for both emissions accounting and enforcement are similarly unclear. Measure AQ-1 also stipulates that "if an agency is transferring water through cropland idling and groundwater substitution, the reduction in vehicle emissions can partially offset groundwater substitution pumping at a rate of 4.25 acre-feet for water produced by idling to one acre-foot of groundwater pumped." The DEIS provides no citation or explanation for how the 4.25 AF/1 AF ratio was determined. Given the range of potential emissions rates associated with pumps of various ages/tiers and fuel types, plus the differing water needs of various crops, it is unclear how a single ratio of groundwater pumping to cropland idling was derived and deemed universally applicable.

EPA's guidance on the General Conformity applicability analysis states, "the Federal agency can take measures to reduce its emissions from the proposed action to in fact below de minimis levels and, thus, the rule would not apply. The changes must be State or Federally enforceable to guarantee that emissions would be below de minimis in the future."<sup>1</sup> While California Environmental Quality Act mitigation measures may be enforceable under state law, the vague language of AQ-1 falls short of guaranteeing the de minimis thresholds will not be exceeded. Without additional information regarding the mechanism and enforcement for mitigation measure AQ-1, the DEIS does not demonstrate that emissions of NO<sub>x</sub> in the Sacramento Metro non-attainment area would be limited to below the de minimus threshold.

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<sup>1</sup> General Conformity Guidance: Questions and Answers (Response to Question 29), July 13, 1994  
<[http://www.epa.gov/air/genconform/documents/gcgqa\\_940713.pdf](http://www.epa.gov/air/genconform/documents/gcgqa_940713.pdf)>

**Recommendation:** Include in the FEIS a detailed description of the processes by which BOR would approve, disapprove or approve with conditions those transfer applications within the Sacramento Metro AQMD such that emissions are maintained below the applicable de minimis and local significance thresholds; similarly for the Feather River AQMD. In order to demonstrate compliance with the General Conformity Rule, the FEIS should clearly show how the proposed mitigation measure would be implemented and enforced. Describe the mechanism for compliance assurance and enforcement, and clearly demonstrate the calculation leading to the 4.25 AF of water produced by idling to one AF of groundwater pumped ratio. Explain why this value is appropriate for all pumping/idling scenarios.

The Department of Agriculture's Natural Resource Conservation Service has a program to promote agricultural production and environmental quality as compatible goals, optimize environmental benefits and help farmers and ranchers meet Federal, State, Tribal, and local environmental regulations. Through the Environmental Quality Improvement Program (EQIP), NRCS provides incentive funding to agricultural producers specifically to reduce NOx, VOCs, PM10 and PM2.5. Currently, incentive funds are available throughout California. The funded conservation practices include the replacement of internal combustion engines in irrigation pumps. For more information, go to <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/ca/programs/financial/eqip/?cid=stelprdb1247003>. As the DEIS notes, a California Air Resources Board airborne toxic control measure contains a schedule for the replacement of older and dirtier diesel agricultural engines.

**Recommendation:** Work with irrigation districts to ensure that individual growers participating in the project are aware of NRCS incentive funding to reduce project related air quality impacts. The FEIS should describe this program and the benefits it might offer for reducing potentially significant air quality impacts with regard to General Conformity.

### **Groundwater Resources**

The proposed project has the potential to cause or exacerbate overdraft of groundwater in the sellers' service area if groundwater substitution transfers are not carefully managed, and if mitigation is not aggressively enforced. One of the primary mechanisms whereby water transfers would be made possible under the proposed action is by groundwater substitution. A seller would pump groundwater in lieu of drawing that same volume of surface water from canal or stream flow. That surface water allocation (less carriage water) would then be sold downstream to a willing buyer in the buyer service area. California's limited regulation of groundwater resources has allowed overdraft of groundwater in parts of the State. When groundwater elevations fall below historic lows, aquifers of certain geologies are subject to collapse, resulting in land subsidence. Areas subject to land subsidence have experienced particularly severe financial and ecological repercussions from groundwater overdraft. These impacts stretch far beyond the individuals pumping the groundwater, impacting entire communities and ecosystems. Furthermore, in dry and critical years, a lack of available water leads a greater proportion of water users to pump groundwater to supplement diminished surface water supplies. These circumstances are likely to co-occur with periods of the greatest number of groundwater substitution transfers.

The analysis of groundwater impacts assumes that transfers would occur at a rate of 12 out of 33 years, or 36% of the time (p. 2-13), based upon the period of record from 1970 to 2003. This data set is truncated to this period due to the limitations of the CalSim II model used, not because this period was deemed to be the most appropriate to represent future conditions. In fact, according to the DEIS (p. 1-



17), north-of-delta to south-of-delta water transfers have taken place in 9 of the past 15 water years -- a rate of 60%. This is nearly double the transfer frequency assumed by the modeling performed.

The proposed project would likely ease and expedite the water transfer process during its 10-year term by removing the need for independent environmental review for transfer approval. The available data suggest that drought frequency will increase and water supply reliability decrease in coming decades as the effects of global climate change take hold of the State (p. 3.6-12). For this reason, it seems reasonable to assume that the frequency of water transfers during the 10-year project term would be at least equivalent to the past 15 years, if not more frequent. This discrepancy could potentially have very substantial influence on the predicted environmental impacts of the project. The conclusions reached in the DEIS regarding impacts upon groundwater elevations, land subsidence, streamflow, water quality, fisheries, wildlife, and economics are predicated on the assumption that natural recharge in non-transfer years will replenish groundwater aquifers. If the modeling performed were based upon the past 15 years of record, the environmental outcomes predicted for each of these resource areas would likely differ from those described in the DEIS.

**Recommendations:** Complete additional modeling that is more representative of current and future reasonably foreseeable conditions with regard to transfer frequency. These results should be incorporated into each major resource area so potential adverse effects can be properly characterized. If the framework of CalSim II does not accommodate such modeling, we recommend that BOR perform a sensitivity analysis to determine the effect of this discrepancy upon overall conclusions regarding project impacts. In addition, BOR should consider what additional tools might be available for more accurately predicting likely project impacts in the event that transfer frequency occurs closer to the rate observed in the past 15 years.

The DEIS is internally inconsistent in defining and treating baseline/existing groundwater elevations. The characterization of existing groundwater conditions uses data sets that conclude at dates ranging from 1995 to 2013, and none include data from the 2013-2014 critical drought year. Where older, outdated data are used, it is possible that recent trends in groundwater elevations or land subsidence are not represented in the analysis. The current drought is perhaps the most severe the state has ever experienced and would be the relevant baseline for additional impacts from the proposed action, slated to commence in 2015. According to the California Department of Water Resources' November 2014 Drought Update<sup>2</sup>, over 50 percent of monitored wells in the Central and Sacramento Valleys have experienced groundwater level decreases of 2.5 feet or more from spring of 2013 to spring of 2014, with over 20% experiencing decreases of more than 10 feet. For the period from spring 2010 to spring 2014, nearly 30% of monitored wells have experienced declines in excess of 10 feet. While the most severe declines occur in the San Joaquin basin, precipitous declines are none-the-less prevalent across a majority of the sellers' service area. Due to these recent declines, some of the monitored wells in the sellers' service area may have reached historic low levels. Consequently, we are concerned that the extent of, or potential for, land subsidence may be greater than is reflected in the DEIS.

According to the DEIS, five of eleven extensometers placed in the Sacramento Valley Groundwater Basin to monitor land subsidence are showing some amount of subsidence on an annual basis. This suggests that groundwater elevations are likely falling below historic lows in some portions of the Sacramento Basin. Analysis of data from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)

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<sup>2</sup> "Public Update for Drought Response: Groundwater Basins with Potential Water Shortages, Gaps in Groundwater Monitoring, Monitoring of Land Subsidence, and Agricultural Land Fallowing," Department of Water Resources, November 2014, [http://www.water.ca.gov/waterconditions/docs/DWR\\_PublicUpdateforDroughtResponse\\_GroundwaterBasins.pdf](http://www.water.ca.gov/waterconditions/docs/DWR_PublicUpdateforDroughtResponse_GroundwaterBasins.pdf)

Gravity Recovery and Climate Experiment (GRACE) satellite mission suggests that, in the Central Valley, including the Sacramento basin, substantial loss of groundwater storage has occurred across the period of 2003 to 2010.<sup>3</sup>

**Recommendation:** Ensure that the most current groundwater elevation and land subsidence data available are used in the characterization of existing conditions and the determination of likely project effects in the FEIS. The FEIS should examine all available data sources regarding groundwater elevations in the seller's service area and include a more thorough consideration of alternate data sources, given data limitations at some monitoring points. We recommend that the FEIS include specific requirements that prohibit the pumping of groundwater below historic lows where the risk of subsidence is present.

The DEIS outlines a monitoring and mitigation measure for ensuring that potentially significant impacts to groundwater are offset; however, this measure (GW-1, p. 3.3-88) largely defers the specifics to a required monitoring and mitigation plan to be developed by the water seller for approval by DWR and BOR in an independent post-NEPA permitting process. While a general framework is offered in the DEIS for how mitigation would be constructed, greater detail is needed to sufficiently demonstrate that environmental harm would be offset. The DEIS states that measure GW-1 will mitigate all impacts from groundwater pumping, placing responsibility for mitigating any "significant adverse impacts" of groundwater pumping on the water seller. Beyond the statement that mitigation "could include... curtailment of pumping until water levels raise above historic lows if non-reversible subsidence is detected," no more specific mitigation thresholds or triggers are provided. Inelastic subsidence is a permanent impact. Implementation of mitigation after it has been monitored to occur means that an irreversible and irretrievable commitment of resources will have occurred. The measure also does not include monitoring or mitigation specifically related to minimizing harm to the aquatic environment. It is not clear what actions could or would be taken if groundwater substitution pumping were found to be dewatering a stream or water body (see comments on stream flow and fisheries impacts).

Measure GW-1 includes language placing financial responsibility on the transferring party for any repercussions of their pumping on others, including the cost to neighbors if the neighbors' pumping expenses increase, and the costs of infrastructure repair or improvements that may be required due to lower groundwater elevations or non-reversible land subsidence. However, as presented in the DEIS, these provisions are unlikely to be enforceable. The DEIS does not include metrics by which claims would be judged and processed, and responsibility apportioned, nor timeframes in which decisions would be made. Also, the DEIS does not define how "assurances that adequate financial resources are available to cover reasonably anticipated mitigation needs" would be made. Where offsetting a neighbor's pumping expenses or replacing public infrastructure is concerned, the expense to the transferring party could easily exceed the financial benefit of the water transfer by many times over.

**Recommendation:** Provide greater detail about monitoring and mitigation measure GW-1 in the FEIS. The FEIS should include clearly defined mitigation triggers for the foreseeable range of potential environmental impacts associated with groundwater substitution transfers, including potential impacts to groundwater elevations, land subsidence, streamflow, fisheries, vegetation, and wildlife. We recommend that Measure GW-1 be revised to improve its enforceability, including providing metrics by which claims would be judged and responsibility would be apportioned, and timeframes in which decisions and distribution of reimbursements would be

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<sup>3</sup> Famiglietti, J. S., Lo, M., Ho, S. L., et al. "Satellites measure recent rates of groundwater depletion in California's Central Valley," *Geophysical Research Letters*, 5 Feb, 2011.

made. The FEIS should also define what constitutes “adequate financial resources to cover reasonably anticipated mitigation needs” and how their availability would be ensured.

Page 3.7-26 of the DEIS states that stream flow reductions as the result of groundwater declines would have a less than significant impact upon fisheries and riparian resources because they “would be observed at monitoring wells in the region and adverse effects on riparian vegetation would be mitigated by implementation of Mitigation Measure GW-1.” The principle mitigation for this impact is the curtailment of pumping until natural recharge corrects the environmental impact. The DEIS overestimates the effectiveness of this measure in avoiding harm to fisheries and riparian resources. Following the curtailment of pumping, a lag time would exist between when the effects of groundwater on streamflows are detected and when the curtailment of pumping would result in the augmentation of stream flows. This lag time could be months to years depending on specific ground and surface water conditions. During this lag time, significant adverse impacts to fisheries could occur.

**Recommendation:** Define, in the FEIS, triggers that would be used to make the decision to continue pumping or to cease pumping. For example, define at what depth below historic lows groundwater pumping would be curtailed, and at what point land subsidence measures are considered to be too great to be elastic and pumping would cease. The FEIS should more accurately characterize the potential for harm to fisheries resources during the lag time between impact observation and mitigation benefit.

In September of this year, Governor Jerry Brown signed a suite of three bills -- AB 1739, SB 1168, and SB 1319 -- collectively called the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act, with the intended goal of moving toward the sustainable management of unadjudicated groundwater basins throughout the state. This legislation will be enacted across the term of the Long Term Water Transfers project and has the potential to affect the proposed project.

**Recommendation:** Discuss the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act in the FEIS. The stipulations of this legislation should be identified in the “Regulatory Framework” portion of section 3.3. The FEIS should also discuss the potential effects of this legislation on the actions proposed for this project.

### **Streamflow Impacts and Water Quality**

The proposed project would affect the quantity and timing of streamflows throughout the sellers’ service area and downstream into the Sacramento/San Joaquin Delta. In an aquatic ecosystem that has already been severely degraded by reduced instream flows related to freshwater diversion and groundwater overdraft, any action with the potential to further reduce flows has the potential to significantly impair water quality. The DEIS states that, due to the timing and magnitude of potential impacts to streamflow, the project will not cause violation of any Delta water quality standards (p. 3.2-40).

The release of transfer carriage water, defined as the “portion of the transfer that is not diverted in the Delta and becomes Delta outflow” (p. 2-29), has the potential to increase outflows by an average of 1.8% (p. 3.2-47) between October and June. The DEIS states that streamflow losses associated with reservoir refilling, groundwater recharge, and loss of irrigation return water are modeled to reduce Delta outflows by up to 0.3 percent during the spring and winter months (3.2-47). However, as discussed in our comments on groundwater resources, the DEIS analysis assumes that water transfers will take place in approximately 35% of water years, while in the past 15 years, transfers have occurred at almost

double this frequency. In the event that transfers occur as often as, or perhaps more often than, observed in recent history, groundwater aquifers may not fully recharge between transfers, resulting in greater impacts to streamflows. Furthermore, it is unclear how the increase in Delta outflow was calculated given that the percent of a given water transfer that will be required for carriage is variable -- assumed for some transfers to be as much as 20% (Sacramento River) and for others to not apply at all (EBMUD diversions) (p. B-18). If the data presented in the DEIS are average values, it is necessary to understand the maximum possible streamflow losses in order to determine the range of possible project impacts.

**Recommendations:** Describe in the FEIS how an increase in transfer frequency might affect expected streamflow and water quality impacts. Clarify how the proportion of a transfer deemed “carriage water” is determined and how these values were used to calculate expected changes in streamflow resulting from project actions.

The California State Water Resources Control Board (State Board) has proposed flow criteria for the lower San Joaquin River Basin<sup>4</sup> and is in the process of preparing a comprehensive update of the Bay Delta Water Quality Control Plan (Bay Delta WQCP) that will include flow criteria for the Delta as a whole.<sup>5</sup> The State Board’s 2010 Flows Report<sup>6</sup> underscores the need to increase flows to and through the estuary to support ecosystem processes, safeguard aquatic life, and protect imperiled species. It is not clear whether or how the proposed project would comply with these new requirements at all times.

Any water transfer program will have to be designed for operational flexibility so it can comply with existing water quality standards (such as the X2 salinity standard within D-1641<sup>7</sup>), and potentially more stringent standards once the comprehensive Bay Delta WQCP is completed. On the whole, these new requirements are anticipated to necessitate that less water be diverted for human consumption and more be left in the river for aquatic life. While Appendix B provides detailed analysis of the project’s potential effects on the X2 salinity standard, the current text of the DEIS constitutes an insufficient summary of these data (p. 3.2-40). In addition, the modeling performed for assessing impacts to the position of X2 relies upon monthly averages of that position. Monthly averages are not the appropriate “time step” as they can mask violations and standards. Impacts to the position of X2 must be analyzed and evaluated in the units in which the standard is written in order to demonstrate compliance.

**Recommendations:** Recent proposals by the State Board to include specific flow requirements in future Water Quality Control Plans for the Sacramento/San Joaquin River Delta should be discussed in the FEIS. Explain how the proposed project would be designed and operated with the flexibility needed to achieve compliance with current water quality standards and future standards that might be significantly more stringent.

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<sup>4</sup> State Water Resources Control Board, December 2012, Public Draft Substitute Environmental Document in Support of Potential Changes to the Water Quality Control Plan for the San Francisco Bay/ Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta Estuary: San Joaquin River Flows and Southern Delta Water Quality. [http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/waterrights/water\\_issues/programs/bay\\_delta/bay\\_delta\\_plan/water\\_quality\\_control\\_planning/2012\\_sed/](http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/waterrights/water_issues/programs/bay_delta/bay_delta_plan/water_quality_control_planning/2012_sed/)

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/waterrights/water\\_issues/programs/bay\\_delta/bay\\_delta\\_plan/water\\_quality\\_control\\_planning/](http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/waterrights/water_issues/programs/bay_delta/bay_delta_plan/water_quality_control_planning/)

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/waterrights/water\\_issues/programs/bay\\_delta/deltaflow/docs/final\\_rpt080310.pdf](http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/waterrights/water_issues/programs/bay_delta/deltaflow/docs/final_rpt080310.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/waterrights/water\\_issues/programs/bay\\_delta/decision\\_1641/index.shtml](http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/waterrights/water_issues/programs/bay_delta/decision_1641/index.shtml). X2 refers to the distance from the Golden Gate up the axis of the estuary to the point where daily average salinity is 2 parts per thousand at 1 meter off the bottom. X2 provides a surrogate measure for the low salinity zone favored by an assemblage of native fish where abundance and survival is statistically greater than in other parts of the estuary. <http://online.sfsu.edu/modelds/Files/References/JassbyEtAl1995EcoApps.pdf>

Streamflow modeling data should be analyzed to determine any change in the position of X2 on a daily basis through time in order to demonstrate that water transfers would not cause the X2 standard to be violated. Include in the FEIS a fuller summary of the data contained in Appendix B to properly support the assertion that the proposed project would not violate the existing X2 standard. If any violations of the X2 standard are found in the modeling to occur on a daily basis, the FEIS should identify this significant impact, indicate the frequency of modeled exceedance, and discuss mitigation that would prevent this impact.

The DEIS states that changes in streamflow of less than ten cubic feet per second (cfs) are assumed to have no impact upon water quality (p. 3.2-27). This assumption is not supported with appropriate citation or data. The explanation that changes of less than 10 cfs are outside the accuracy of the model employed is insufficient to demonstrate that this threshold is physically or chemically appropriate. Depending on water levels and flow conditions, a loss of 10 cfs could degrade water quality.

**Recommendation:** Explain, in the FEIS, the basis for the assumption that streamflow changes of less than 10 cfs would not affect water quality. If data supporting such an assumption are not available, we recommend that BOR reconsider its use of this assumption for its analysis. If a lower threshold for significance is deemed appropriate, but the available modeling tools lack the resolution to predict all impacts at this threshold, we recommend that the remaining uncertainty be clearly identified in the FEIS and a precautionary approach be taken with regard to permitting water transfer related actions.

The DEIS considers potential streamflow impacts to smaller tributaries in Section 3.7. It states that, for rivers and their major tributaries, groundwater and streamflow modeling was compared against historical flow data to assess impacts to surface water flows. For smaller streams and water bodies, where insufficient data were available to allow this approach, the analysis assumed that streamflow response was similar to that of larger adjacent modeled waterways. This approach is significantly flawed. Model resolution is not the appropriate basis for excluding smaller waterways from a more detailed examination. Smaller water bodies will respond differently to changes in groundwater contributions than will larger water bodies and are potentially much more sensitive to small changes in flow magnitude and frequency. Where a loss or reduction in groundwater contributions to a section of a large water way may result in a small reduction in flow, but no loss of ecological function, the same reduction in groundwater contributions to a smaller tributary stream could result in near or complete dewatering and a significant degradation of ecological function.

**Recommendations:** Additional site specific information, including streamflow data and the likely proportion of flow contributed by groundwater, is needed in order to determine the likely effect of groundwater substitution transfers on smaller streams and waterbodies in the sellers' service area. The FEIS should explicitly identify where uncertainty exists due to model limitations, and describe the range of potential impacts contained within that uncertainty. In the absence of the necessary site specific data for a more comprehensive analysis, we recommend that BOR consider taking a precautionous approach to minimize potential ecological risk.

The DEIS states that changes in stream flows on the San Joaquin River and in the Sacramento/San Joaquin Delta will be less than significant because total reductions in flow will be only a fraction of a percent. A two percent reduction in flow is identified as the threshold for significance for this impact. A more refined analysis of impacts to species would have to be conducted to determine whether this