February 21, 2019

Strategic Water Planning Branch
California Water Plan Update
Statewide Integrated Water Management
California Department of Water Resources
Attn: Francisco Guzman
Email: cwpcom@water.ca.gov

SUBJECT: Westlands Water District Comments on the Public Review Draft of the California Water Plan Update 2018

Dear Mr. Guzman,

Westlands Water District (Westlands) appreciates the opportunity to comment on the proposed California Water Plan Update 2018 (Plan). Westlands provides agricultural water service to approximately 600,000 acres of the California’s most productive farmland, in western Fresno and Kings Counties. Westlands recognizes the need to manage California’s water supplies sustainably and to invest in water resource planning, infrastructure, and management. Accordingly, Westlands and its growers have invested approximately $1 Billion in an enclosed water distribution system and high efficiency irrigation systems. Westlands’ growers routinely exceed irrigation efficiencies of 85%.

General Comments

The Plan identifies six (6) challenges to sustainability and offers six (6) goals for meeting these challenges. Westlands notes that most of these challenges have faced California for some time and there have been various uncoordinated efforts to address them, with limited success and at a high cost to water supply. The Plan recognizes that reduced and unreliable water supply are critical challenges. However, it fails to note that these challenges are driven, in many areas, by regulations intended to improve the ecosystem. It also fails to recognize that those regulations have been ineffective and myopic – relying on changes in how water is appropriated, as the “master variable”, with the hope that flow will address all factors that adversely affect the abundance of aquatic species. That strategy has failed. The Plan should recognize the importance of comprehensive approaches – that directly address the physical, chemical, and biological changes that have occurred within the watershed.

Additionally, the Plan should better recognize – emphasize – the important role public water agencies have played in addressing the water supply and reliability challenges. Public water agencies are responsible for implementing local water management programs, such as
Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA), the Long-Term Irrigated Lands Regulatory Program, and Integrated Regional Water Management plans. These programs cost tens if not hundreds of millions of dollars. Public water agencies invest in their own capital, operation and maintenance of facilities, and in capital and operation and maintenance of facilities used to store and convey water to them, such as costs associated with the CVP or State Water Project. And, public water agencies invest in science and ecosystem improvement efforts. Through those efforts, hundreds of millions of dollars are invested. Public water agencies seek to balance all of these efforts, and others, to ensure the costs do not become unduly burdensome on their ratepayers.

Specific Plan Comments

Page 1-1: The listing of State Initiatives and Investments should indicate programs that are funded or expected to be funded by local agencies (e.g. SGMA and Water Fix), and the listing should include those initiatives that include other programs, such as the federal Restoration Fund component.

Page 1-2: The last bullet point describing the State Water Resources Control Board's update to the Water Quality Control Plan indicates that voluntary agreements are a "complement" to the Bay Delta Plan update. These proposed agreements are alternatives to update proposed by State Water Board staff.

Page 1-3, closing paragraph, first sentence, of the discussion on State Initiatives and Investments: In addition to water supplies being unreliable and unsafe (for some uses), water supplies are, and in some areas will be, inadequate to meet reasonable demands.

Page 1-5, Figure 1-1: Under the subsection of Environmental Water for the tabulation of Applied Water, it is unclear whether reductions in export pumping due to implementation of Reasonable and Prudent alternatives for protection of Delta Smelt and anadromous species are included as an environmental use. If they are not, Westlands believes they should be.

Page 1-7, Figure 1-3: The Department of Water Resources’ estimates of groundwater pumping have been significantly greater than actual in the Tulare Lake Basin and particularly, the Westside Subbasin. The Department of Water Resources should confirm that those quantities have been updated to better reflect the actual pumping.

Page 2-1, opening paragraph, second to last sentence under the section describing Critical, Systemic, and Institutional Challenges, indicates that there will be ongoing conflicts between ecological and human needs. That should not be a concession. The State should pursue alternative/creative approaches to regulation that can meet demands of these competing beneficial uses.

Page 2-2, fourth bullet point under the section describing Critical Challenges, the Plan notes the concern over declining groundwater levels. It should also note that a major contributing factor to declining water levels have been regulations intended to provide ecosystem benefits at the expense of surface water supplies.

Page 2-3, eighth bullet point under the section describing Critical Challenges, the Plan describes the conflicts in the Delta between “water users, environmental outcomes and local stakeholders.” The Plan should also indicate that at various times “environmental outcomes” have conflicted with one another (regulation requiring maintenance of upstream storage conflicts with regulation
requiring Delta outflow). This is also reflected in the second bullet under Systemic and Institutional Challenges.

Page 2-4, second bullet point under Systemic and Institutional Challenges: Inconsistent and Conflicting Regulations are key problems that must be resolved to address the declining ecosystem. It will be difficult to implement adaptive management strategies without resolving these conflicts.

Page 3-2, Recommended Action 3.1, Addressing Legacy Impacts: In addition to integrating ecological principles into infrastructure planning, there should be a focus on addressing Legacy Impacts that are a product of physical, biological, and chemical changes within the watershed.

Page 3-4, Recommended Action 6.7, Explore Ways to Develop Stable and Sufficient Funding: This action should include a policy that there be a direct link between the source of the funding and how and where the funding is spent. Funding should be focused on projects that meet the goals of the local agencies. And, the local agencies should have control over how the funds are spent.

Page 4-5, Novel Funding Mechanisms: This section of the Plan sets forth potential funding concepts for Action 6.7. All of these except Risk Reduction Insurance involve increased costs. Given the heavy burden already imposed on ratepayers, as illustrated in Figure 1-4, (a) through (c), and in the General Comments at the outset of this letter, the decision on which concepts, if any, are implemented, must be left to local agencies, as they are best situated to evaluate the efficacy of each concept and are directly accountable to the ratepayers.

Westlands looks forward to the final version of the Plan and hopes these comments will inform its development. If you have any questions concerning these comments, please call me to discuss them, at 559-241-6241.

Sincerely,

Russ Freeman
Deputy General Manager - Resources