

State water chief admits mistakes in management

By Alex Breitler / Record Staff Writer

Posted Feb 19, 2015 at 7:08 PM

The head of the watchdog agency overseeing California water said he was “mistaken” last year when he approved emergency actions that harmed threatened fish.

At a 12-hour hearing in Sacramento on Wednesday, Tom Howard, executive officer of the State Water Resources Control Board, made clear the impact of the severe drought on people.

But he also said he was “just wrong” when he concluded last year that temporarily changing the rules to keep more water in reservoirs would not cause unreasonable harm to the environment.

Despite that admission, Howard approved many of the same emergency changes this year, such as reducing flows through the Delta to hold back more water in upstream reservoirs.

He denied, however, a request by state and federal water agencies to also increase water exports from the south Delta under certain conditions. Wednesday’s meeting was to gather comments on that decision and other aspects of the emergency rule changes.

The water board heard hours of testimony from emotional south Valley farmers and farm workers, who said they were suffering for lack of water, as well as from environmentalists who supported the lower pumping levels in order to protect the Delta.

Threatened Delta smelt crashed to their lowest level on record last year, and 95 percent of endangered winter-run Chinook salmon eggs and juveniles died upstream on the Sacramento River. Environmentalists have argued that the plight of the fish was worsened by last year’s water

management decisions, an argument that Howard seemed to validate on Wednesday.

The length of the hearing showed just how difficult an subject this was for the state regulators.

“Clearly, reasonable people are going to differ on this issue,” Howard said.

Board members said at the end of the meeting that they wanted more information before issuing an order perhaps next month.

So far, the consequence to water users has been relatively minor. The state board estimates that water exporters have missed out on an opportunity to pump about 5,000 acre-feet of water as a result of Howard’s decision.

Unless there are storms in March, however, the state board estimates the decision could cost water users anywhere from 69,000 to 84,000 acre-feet, a more significant amount of water.

Still, farm workers who arrived by bus on Wednesday talked about how they cannot provide for their families. One woman said her daughter had to drop out of college because she could not afford tuition and books. The family hasn’t been able to work since September.

Ultimately, the situation boils down to making “terrible choices,” board Chair Felicia Marcus said.

“There’s not a big pot of water we can manufacture” to satisfy the state’s many needs, she said.