

**OPERATION OF NEW MELONES RESERVOIR:
Melones reservoir redefined; Officials discuss dam's balance of
water and fish
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By Warren Lutz, staff writer**

STOCKTON -- Federal water authorities took a tentative step this week toward creating a new operating plan for the New Melones Reservoir that would balance the needs of fish habitats, water quality in the Delta and drought protection.

They also promised an open and inclusive process. That is, if everybody can get along.

"If a consensus is not achievable, ultimately (we) may have to say, 'This is the plan,'" said Ronald Milligan, Central Valley operations manager for the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation.

The New Melones Dam is on the Stanislaus River, 40 miles east of Stockton.

Milligan's comments followed a meeting of several dozen water agency, local, state and federal officials in Stockton to announce how the New Melones Revised Plan of Operations would begin.

A new plan is needed because the bureau has been operating on an interim plan since the late 1990s. Officials hope to complete the plan by 2010.

Controversy surrounds New Melones, which delivers water to farmers and Stockton residents -- though not as much as local officials once hoped.

The Stockton East Water District and the Central San Joaquin Water District in 1983 signed contracts to receive up to 155,000 acre-feet of New Melones water a year. As part of the contracts, the two water districts built the \$65 million Goodwin Tunnel to receive their share of water.

Yet they have received only a fraction of the water they wanted. The bureau has said in the past it needed New Melones water to benefit salmon runs on the Stanislaus River and dilute salt in the Delta.

The water districts are now suing the bureau for \$500 million. A hearing in the matter is scheduled for next month in Washington, D.C.

Both districts received a bolt of hope when a federal claims judge last year awarded \$26 million to the Tulare Lake Water Storage District and Kern County Water Agency for water the federal government never delivered.

The current New Melones plan was only supposed to last a year or two. Stockton East manager Kevin Kauffman said he is glad the bureau is finally creating something more solid.

"I think we're all a little uneasy," he said. "I think that's generally why we're concerned. Nothing is formalized."

Milligan said a drought several years ago staved off the creation of a new plan, as the participating agencies were overly concerned with the lack of water. "We have some distance from that now," he said. #

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