



Sections

**Trump  
administration** >  
[Immigration](#)  
[Environment](#)  
[Economy](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

CLIMATE & ENVIRONMENT

## Acting on Trump's order, federal officials opened up two California dams



Aerial view of Success Dam, which feeds into the Tule River. (Robert Gauthier/Los Angeles Times)

By [Ian James](#) and [Jessica Garrison](#)

Jan. 31, 2025 **Updated** 4:40 PM PT

 Share

- The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers abruptly increased the amount of water flowing from two California dams.
- The federal agency made the decision after President Trump signed an order calling for increased water deliveries.
- Local water managers, who were caught off-guard by the decision, said they convinced Army Corps officials to release less water than originally planned.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has dramatically increased the amount of water flowing from two dams in Tulare County, sending massive flows down river channels toward farmlands in the San Joaquin Valley.

Federal records show that water releases from Terminus Dam at Lake Kaweah and Schafer Dam at Lake Success jumped early Friday morning.

The sudden increase occurred four days after President Trump said on social media that the U.S. military had “entered” California and “TURNED ON THE WATER.” Trump also vowed during a visit to Los Angeles last week to [“open up the valves and pumps”](#) in California to deliver more water.

According to federal data, the flow from Terminus Dam into the Kaweah River near Visalia increased from 57 cubic feet per second to more than 1,500 on Friday morning. The flow from Lake Success near Porterville into the Tule River increased from 105 cubic feet per second to 990.

ADVERTISEMENT

The Army Corps of Engineers is “conducting controlled water releases” from the two dams, said Tyler Stalker, a spokesperson for the Corps in Sacramento. “The action is being coordinated with local officials. The releases are within the capacity of the downstream waterways.”

Responding to questions about the reasons for the sudden increase in water flow, Gene Pawlik, a spokesperson at the Corps’ headquarters in Washington, said in an email that the action was “consistent with the direction” in Trump’s [recent executive order](#) to enact

“emergency measures to provide water resources” in California.

Pawlik said the Army Corps was releasing water from the dams “to ensure California has water available to respond to the wildfires.” It was not immediately clear how or where the federal government intends to transport the water.



CLIMATE & ENVIRONMENT

## Trump reenters California’s water wars. It’s unclear who will win

Jan. 27, 2025

Trump, meanwhile, [shared a photo on X](#) of water pouring from a dam, saying: “Photo of beautiful water flow that I just opened in California.”

“Today, 1.6 billion gallons and, in 3 days, it will be 5.2 billion gallons. Everybody should be happy about this long fought Victory!,” Trump wrote. “I only wish they listened to me six years ago — There would have been no fire!”

The president has sought to link local water supply problems during the L.A. County firestorms, such as [fire hydrants that ran dry](#), with his calls for changing water management elsewhere in the state. But state officials and water experts [have called](#) the comments inaccurate: Regional reservoirs in Southern California are at record-high levels, and more water from Northern California would [not have affected the fire response](#).

ADVERTISEMENT

Water was released from the dams as the first of two approaching atmospheric river storms [brought snow and rain](#) to California.





The Success Dam feeds into the Tule River. (Robert Gauthier/Los Angeles Times)

Dam managers in California sometimes release water ahead of major storms to make room in reservoirs for more runoff. But the federal agency's comments about Trump's executive order suggest that this case was different.

State officials were "not part of the decision-making" to release water from the federal reservoirs, said Karla Nemeth, director of the California Department of Water Resources.

"We traditionally have a high degree of coordination at the operational level, which really wasn't a part of this decision," Nemeth said.

The two reservoirs are used to hold supplies for agricultural irrigation districts. Nemeth noted that winter is not the irrigation season for farms, which require more supplies to grow crops in the summer months, "so there isn't a demand" for the water in the San Joaquin Valley at this time.

ADVERTISEMENT

The dams are also used to regulate the pace of floodwaters that could otherwise affect downstream areas, Nemeth said. During historic storms in 2023, she said, the state sought to

work with local landowners to [capture flood flows](#) where possible to replenish groundwater.

“I really can’t speak to the decision process at the Corps to make this release at this time,” she said.



CLIMATE & ENVIRONMENT

## California snowpack is below average, but winter storms could change that

Jan. 31, 2025

It was not clear where federal officials intended to send the water that was being released from the dams.

Local water managers said they were caught off-guard by the federal government’s plans on Thursday. Dan Vink, a water consultant who previously served as general manager of the Lower Tule River Irrigation District, called the situation “extremely unprecedented.”

Vink said local water officials heard Thursday afternoon that the Army Corps planned to “go from a fairly nominal release to channel capacity in two hours.”

A release of that magnitude, he said, would normally be coordinated days in advance, in part because farmers might have expensive farm equipment placed near riverbanks. There are also homeless encampments near some riverbanks, and officials would want to make sure people were out of the way and not in danger before unleashing so much water.

ADVERTISEMENT



People look at a full pool of water behind Schafer Dam forming Lake Success on the Tule River in the Central Valley during a winter storm in Tulare County east of Porterville, Calif., in March 2023. (Patrick T. Fallon/Getty Images)

The local water managers on Thursday communicated their concerns to the Army Corps officials, who agreed to release less water than originally planned and to delay the releases until Friday, Vink said.

Aaron Fukuda, general manager of the Tulare Irrigation District, [told the news site SJV Water](#) that normally such flood releases are done with a great deal of prior notification and coordination. “I’ve been doing this 18 years and have never seen something like this,” he said.

Peter Gleick, a water scientist and senior fellow at the Pacific Institute, said dam managers would typically only release large quantities of water in the winter when major storms create a need to make space for large inflows of runoff. But Southern California has been very dry and the snowpack in the southern Sierra remains far below average, so “there is no indication that that’s why these releases occurred.”

“In addition, when those kinds of releases do occur, they’re always done in consultation with local and state agencies,” Gleick said.

“I don’t know where this water is going, but this is the wrong time of year to be releasing water from these reservoirs. It’s vitally important that we fill our reservoirs in the rainy season so water is available for farms and cities later in the summer,” Gleick said. “I think it’s very strange and it’s disturbing that, after decades of careful local, state and federal coordination, some federal agencies are starting to unilaterally manipulate California’s water supply.”

Vink agreed, saying that given how dry it has been in the region this winter, there was no need to make such a release. In fact, he said, farmers were counting on that water to be available for summer irrigation.

“This is going to hurt farmers,” Vink said. “This takes water out of their summer irrigation portfolio.”

Democratic Sen. Alex Padilla criticized the administration’s decision and demanded answers.

“Unscheduled water releases require close coordination with local officials and safety personnel, as well as downstream agricultural water users, in order to reduce flood risks to communities and farms,” Padilla said in a [letter](#) to Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth. “Based on the urgent concerns I have heard from my constituents, as well as recent reporting, it appears that gravely insufficient notification was given, recklessly endangering residents downstream.”

Padilla asked Hegseth several questions, including who made the decision, how much advance notice was given to irrigation districts and local officials, and what impact the releases will have on communities and landowners. He also asked: “If the purpose of these releases is to help fight wildfires in Los Angeles County (which are already almost fully contained), what is the plan to transport this water to Los Angeles rather than let the water simply be discharged into Tulare Lake where it will evaporate?”



CLIMATE & ENVIRONMENT

## Climate change identified as main driver of worsening drought in the Western United States

Nov. 7, 2024

Meanwhile, Gov. Gavin Newsom took other actions to adjust how the state is managing water. With two storms approaching on Friday, Newsom [signed an executive order](#) that aims to divert and store more storm runoff.

The [order](#) directs the Department of Water Resources and other state agencies to maximize the storage and capture of water from rivers to recharge groundwater and boost reservoirs such as San Luis Reservoir, located south of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.

“It is more important than ever that we maximize every opportunity to recharge our groundwater supplies,” Newsom said.

“We are also preparing to use every last drop to boost our water supply for communities and farms throughout the state,” Newsom said. “By storing these stormwaters, we are creating a literal rainy day fund to help us recover from a [multiyear drought](#) and prepare for our hotter, drier future.”

## More to Read



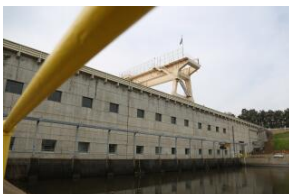
**Column: What does Trump know about California’s water system? So much less than he’d ever admit**

Feb. 3, 2025



**Newsom issues order to ‘maximize’ water capture during storms. Critics say it sounds just like Trump**

Feb. 1, 2025





## Trump has vowed to pump more water. Government data show pumping was down for maintenance

Jan. 31, 2025

Show Comments

CLIMATE & ENVIRONMENT

CALIFORNIA

WATER & DROUGHT

TRUMP ADMINISTRATION



**Ian James**



Ian James is a reporter who focuses on water and climate change in California and the West. Before joining the Los Angeles Times in 2021, he was an environment reporter at the Arizona Republic and the Desert Sun. He previously worked for the Associated Press as a correspondent in the Caribbean and as bureau chief in Venezuela. Follow him on Bluesky @ianjames.bsky.social and on X @ByIanJames.

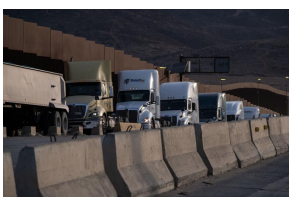


**Jessica Garrison**



Jessica Garrison writes about Northern California for the Los Angeles Times. She has previously covered Los Angeles City Hall, courts, education and the environment. As a reporter, her work has won a National Magazine Award for Public Service, among other honors. Work she has edited has won a George Polk Award and was a finalist for a Goldsmith Prize. Her book, “The Devil’s Harvest,” told the story of a contract killer who stalked Central Valley farm towns for years while authorities failed to bring him to justice. She is a graduate of UC Berkeley.

### More From the Los Angeles Times



BUSINESS

**Trump delays tariffs on Mexico, easing stocks, but Canada and China remain in play**

Feb. 3, 2025



WORLD & NATION

## Mexico reaches deal with Trump to avert tariffs for at least a month



CALIFORNIA

## Atmospheric river storm set to hit SoCal Tuesday. What to know about the rain and the risks

Feb. 3, 2025



WORLD & NATION

## Column: Trump is creating an imperial presidency — and he's doing it by decree

Feb. 3, 2025

ADVERTISEMENT

A *California Times* Publication

[Subscribe for unlimited access](#)

[Site Map](#)

Follow Us





[eNewspaper](#)

[Coupons](#)

[Find/Post Jobs](#)

[Place an Ad](#)

[Media Kit: Why the L.](#)

[MORE FROM THE L.A. TIMES](#)

[Crossword](#)

[Obituaries](#)

[Recipes](#)

[Guides](#)

[L.A. Times Store](#)

[About/Contact](#)

[For the Record](#)

[L.A. Times Careers](#)

[Manage Subscription](#)

[Reprints and  
Permissions](#)