

EDITORIAL: Valley leaders must address increasing water overdraft

By The Bee Editorial Board

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Farmers, politicians and many others in California have implored Gov. Jerry Brown to declare a drought emergency.

Their hope is that some relaxation of the myriad rules regarding water deliveries and transfers will help the state better survive what looks to be a third consecutive dry year.

It appears that Brown has heard their message. Monday, during a visit to Fresno, the governor said: "I am planning to ... do whatever we can in terms of water exchanges, working with local farmers and water districts to maximize the resources that we have. It is really serious and my staff and administration are preparing appropriate papers to do what is necessary."

But Central Valley farmers also need to know that a new water era is approaching. Regulation of groundwater pumping -- a topic usually deemed too hot to handle in the state Capitol -- could become a reality.

Think not?

Consider that neighboring Arizona has strict groundwater management regulations. In that state, owners of large wells must measure how much water they take out of the ground and report the totals.

Colorado also regulates groundwater pumping.

There is little doubt that Brown is rightfully concerned about the overdraft on California's aquifer.

As a Modesto Bee editorial noted on Tuesday: There is "language in Gov. Jerry Brown's proposed budget which earmarks nearly \$12 million to chase down 'regional authorities (that) are unable or unwilling to sustainably manage groundwater basins.' "

Some counties in the Central Valley are trying to get ahead of the game. They realize that if they don't address the problem, the state will be on their doorstep.

Stanislaus County, for example, appointed Walt Ward as its first "water czar" this week. Ward comes to the position after 17 years with Modesto Irrigation District.

Ward's first assignment is to work with the county's appointed water advisory committee of 21 members on authoring groundwater policy recommendations.

The county desperately needed to do something. With growers there desperate to irrigate almond orchards and pumping more groundwater than ever, water tables are falling and home wells are drying up.

It is much the same story all over the combined San Joaquin and Sacramento valleys, known as the Central Valley. The state Department of Water Resources says that about 70% of California's groundwater pumping takes place here.

The Kings River Conservation District -- which encompasses 1.1 million acres of farms and communities in Fresno, Tulare and Kings counties -- estimates that 500,000 acre feet of water were overdrafted from below the ground in 2013. Last year Westlands Water District had about 600,000 acre feet of overdraft. That combined total would fill Pine Flat Reservoir -- and spill over the top of the dam.

California isn't going to stop growing. There will be increasing demand for water accompanied by intense political battles over who gets it and how much it costs.

Valley farmers had better work with local leaders to rein in their narcotic-like addiction to -- or the state will swoop in with its own prescriptions.

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