

California farms to get some drought relief

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By Matt Weiser

mweiser@sacbee.com

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Farmworker Fernando Huerta of Madera, right, listens with other protesters during the water rally Tuesday afternoon that drew hundreds to Firebaugh. JOHN WALKER — The Fresno Bee

California and federal water officials say there is enough runoff in the Delta from recent storms to begin delivering some water to farms, potentially offering at least temporary drought relief.

On Feb. 1, the State Water Resources Control Board approved a temporary order exempting the California Department of Water Resources and U.S. Bureau of Reclamation from some water quality standards in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta to help retain water stored in upstream reservoirs. The exemption was approved on the condition that the agencies jointly divert no more

than 1,500 cubic feet per second, and only for public health and safety purposes, which generally means urban uses.

Now, thanks to relatively abundant February rains, DWR and Reclamation have asked for a change to that order so they can send some of this diverted water to farms. They're also asking the water board to relax a standard for Delta freshwater outflow that increases at the end of March, which will allow them to continue holding back water stored in reservoirs. The standard normally requires outflow of 11,000 cfs, but will be reduced to 7,100 cfs.

"We're growing more comfortable that ... we'll be able to meet all essential public health and safety needs," said DWR director Mark Cowin.

Tom Howard, executive director of the water board, said he expected to approve the request by the end of the day Tuesday.

Officials cautioned that the announcement does not change the forecast for "zero" water allocations for farms made by DWR and Reclamation last month. Those allocations are a forecast of future deliveries during the dry summer months. An update to that forecast is expected about April 1, but it's not expected to change significantly because snowpack throughout the state remains unusually low. That means farmers still have to plan for a dry summer.

"The hydrology is such that there's an awful long way to go to meet the demands we have," said Pablo Arroyave, Reclamation deputy regional director.

The rule amendments also allow DWR and Reclamation to divert more than 1,500 cfs during storm runoff events as long as they satisfy other Delta water quality standards. As a result, they've been pumping water out of the Delta at well above 4,000 cfs during most of March.

Wildlife advocates fear such high diversion rates during the drought, along with loosening of Delta outflow requirements, will harm endangered fish species. As of Sunday, the two diversion systems had killed an estimated 246 endangered winter- and spring-run salmon during March.

"We get population changes in times like this that ripple forward for decades," said Bill Jennings, executive director of the California Sportfishing Protection Alliance. "This is going to be a horrible year."

Call The Bee's Matt Weiser at (916) 321-1264. Follow him on Twitter [@matt_weiser](https://twitter.com/matt_weiser).