

# Our View: More water flowing to West Side, but more frustration, too

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Growers on the west side of the Valley got a little good news late last week: They're going to get more water than they had feared. That's not to say they're going to get all the water they need, far from it. But the specter of drought is lifting ever so slightly.

"The mood is better and hopeful," said Chris White, general manager of the Central California Irrigation District, which covers 145,000 acres from Crows Landing to Mendota.

February and March storms deposited roughly 225,000 acre-feet of water in the Sacramento River snowpack. That gave CCID officials confidence to tell their growers to expect up to 31 inches – even without a promise from the federal Bureau of Reclamation. Why make such a promise? Because farmers have been putting off the decision to plant until the last possible moment – and that moment has arrived.

"It's not too late to make some planting decisions," said White. "The majority (of decisions) can be made as long as they're made *right now*."

Unfortunately, good news on the West Side isn't necessarily good news in Fresno and points south. Most of the water will come from the Sacramento River, but some might flow north from Millerton Reservoir near Fresno depending on decisions by the Bureau of Reclamation.

CCID is one of four irrigation districts known as Exchange Contractors, districts with historic rights to the San Joaquin River. When Friant Dam diverted the San Joaquin south in the 1940s, the four districts were given ironclad promises that they'd be first line for water from federal reservoirs on the Sacramento River. Until this year, those promises were kept. But during the driest December and January on record, the Bureau of Reclamation warned it might not be able to provide *any* of its promised Sacramento flows. So, for the first time since the exchange agreements were signed in 1939, the contractors might have to use their historic rights and demand San Joaquin River water from Millerton Reservoir.

"That's why (south valley growers are) at zero allocation – and it's staying that way," said Steve Chedester, the Exchange Contractors' executive director. "We have to get to our 75 percent of contract allocation. Until we get there, their tides will not rise."

White and Chedester, who take no joy in denying south valley growers water, are frustrated with how the state and federal governments are managing water. They point out that in 1977 – the worst

drought of the past 75 years – there was less water in the reservoirs but more water delivered to the state's farmers.

“What has changed?” asked Chedester rhetorically. Essentially, state and federal water managers are now required to store more water in Shasta Lake to benefit salmon and trout. In other words, the state is holding back water as an environmental hedge against another dry year.

“They’re going to kill ag this year on a hedge for next year,” Chedester said. “That’s fundamentally wrong. None of us want to see the Delta salted up so that it’s unusable for any of us – we all support (flows through the Delta). We’re on the same page. But they ought to be able to release some of that water ... so that maybe Friant can get some of the San Joaquin River water so we don’t have to take it all.”

So yes, there was good news for some of California’s farmers last week. But like water, there just wasn’t enough of it.